

BOUND
— *to the* —
HIGHLANDER'S
Paradise

ELOISE MADIGAN

Bound to the Highlander's Paradise

A Scottish Historical Romance Novel

Eloise Madigan



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Also by Eloise Madigan
About the Author

A Steamy Gift For You...

Thanks a lot for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me, because this is the best way to show me your love.

As a Thank You gift I have written a full length novel for you, called ***Captured by His Highland Kiss***. It's only available to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by tapping the image below or [this link here](#).



Once more, thanks a lot for your love and support.

Eloise Madigan



Their past was stolen, but they will claim their future together...

She remembers living in a Castle, but Isla Sutherland's life is far from royal. Residing with her potty-mouthed aunt in the forest, she makes ends meet as a healer. When she finds a living corpse near her house, she vows to help him, even if he is dangerous...

Arran Woods finds himself staring at the most beautiful woman on Earth: the one who healed him. With no memory of his past, he adjusts to life in the forest. Until the day a new injury helps him remember: he is the missing Laird.

Despite the threats all around them, Isla and Arran's love protects them from the outside world. When he returns to claim his Lairdship, he finds another man sitting on the throne. Arran has to earn back his clan, but Isla remembers the man from another lifetime...

Scottish Brogue Glossary

Here is a very useful glossary my good friend Lydia Kendall sent to me, that will help you better understand **the Scottish Brogue** used:

about - about

ach - oh

afore - before

an' - and

anythin - anything

a'side - beside

askin' - asking

a'tween - between

auld - old

aye - yes

bampot - a jerk

bare bannock- a type of biscuit

bearin' - bearing

beddin' - bedding or sleeping with

bellend - a vulgar slang word

blethering - blabbing

blooterred - drunk

bonnie - beautiful or pretty

bonniest - prettiest

cannae - cannot

chargin' - charging

cheesin' - happy

clocked - noticed

c'mon- come on

couldn'ae - couldn't

coupla - couple of

crivens - hell

cuddie - idiot

dae - do

dinin' - dining

dinnae - didn't or don't

disnae - doesn't

dobber - idiot

doesn'ae - doesn't

dolton - idiot

doon - down

dram - a measure of whiskey

efter - after

eh' - right

'ere - here

fer - for

frein - friend

fey - from

gae - get or give

git - a contemptible person

gonnae - going to

greetin' - dying

hae - have

hald - hold

haven'ae - haven't

heed - head

heedstart - head start

hid - had

hoovered - gobbled

intoxicated - drunk

kip - rest

lass - young girl

leavin - leaving

legless - drunk

me - my

nae - not

no' - not

noo - now

nothin' - nothing,

oan - on

o' - of

Och - an Olympian spirit who rules the sun

oot- out

packin- packing

pished - drunk

scooby - clue

scrان - food

shite - shit

sittin' - sitting

so's - so as

somethin' - something

soonds ' sounds

stonking - stinking

tae - to

teasin' - teasing

thrawn - perverse, ill-tempered

tryin' - trying

wallops - idiot

wee -small

wheest - talking

whit's - what's

wi'- with

wid - would

wisnae - was not

withoot - without

wouldnae - wouldn't

ya - you

ye - you

yea - yes

ye'll - you'll

yer - your

yerself - yourself

ye're - you're

ye've - you've

Before You Start Reading...

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The fresh dewy air trickled into the cottage that lay within the thick woods. Birds were waking with the growing dawn light, and the wind was blowing heavily through the mass of branches from above. A thin stream of smoke rose from the chimney as Isla Sutherland rose from her slumber, ready for another day of gathering herbs.

After getting changed into a simple cotton dress, she allowed her long hair to cascade down her back, dark like a tree trunk. Isla lived a relatively simple life in the middle of nowhere with her aunt. Every day was a similar day that brought similar challenges, but she didn't mind.

Her life consisted of working with nature to help heal the patients that came to see her aunt; they were the kind of people who were desperately in need of medical help, yet the physicians in the towns they had come from would be too expensive.

She always felt fulfilled in healing people, it was the kind of role that allowed her to help in some small way.

Isla stepped out of her small bedroom to see that her aunt was already beginning to boil leaves and extract certain materials out of flowers.

"Good morning," Elsie, her aunt, said without looking up from what she was doing. She wore a thin pair of glasses on the end of her nose and her tongue stuck out as she was clearly focusing deeply on the delicate flower between her fingers.

"Please tell me that ye have been to sleep," Isla said with a chuckle as she walked over to her station of herbs.

“Aye, I was able to sleep for a couple of hours.”

But Isla knew that wasn't the truth. She'd been woken before dawn by the sound of her aunt shuffling around in the kitchen. The strong scent of burning that drifted into Isla's bedroom confirmed to her that her aunt had been infusing certain herbs just before dawn. She always said that they were much more effective that way.

“I'll head out to pick some more herbs,” Isla said while grabbing her bag that hung from her shoulder.

“Can ye make sure to get lots of foxglove, please? We're running a little low,” Elsie said while sitting at the table. She still hadn't looked up from her work, but Isla knew that it would take precedent in her mind.

“Aye,” she nodded while heading for the door. “I will.”

“And dinnae forget about yarrow again!” Elsie called as Isla shut the door.

The woods were quiet as soon as she left the contained world of her aunt's cottage. It was always alive with the sounds of a pestle and mortar, or the clinking of wind chimes if there was a light breeze.

But that morning felt very still, and Isla wasn't sure why. She tried using her senses as her aunt had taught her; the lack of wind against her skin was the first thing that properly caught her attention, her palms tingled as she stretched the limits of her senses. It felt as though the forest was holding its breath for something, waiting for her to explore deeper.

Isla walked carefully along the moss-covered stones, she had to get to the small stream where the herbs would normally grow in abundance. She smiled at the birds that cut through the trees, dodging branches as they chirped, adding more sound to the environment around her than just her old boots on the stones.

Isla kept her gaze down to make sure that she wouldn't slip on the greener areas, knowing that they held enough dampness within them that would cause her to fall should she lose her footing and slip.

Something scurried into the undergrowth on her left, but Isla knew

that it would be perhaps a squirrel or a mouse. She was used to the sounds of the animals around her, but she still preferred it when they made themselves known.

The first few patients would be coming to see her aunt soon, and so Isla knew that she was going to have to hurry to gather up what she needed. She bit her lip and quickly crouched down as she approached the stream; her arms were outstretched as her feet balanced precariously on the uneven ground.

The water trickled down from the Highlands; it cut across the land as though it held the power to slice through thick stone, but it was the purest water that she had ever tasted. Her aunt had told her that there was no other water like it in the country, that it was so pure and came from the caves within the rocks around them. Isla had stopped listening when her aunt had spoken about its source being blessed by fairies; while she could entertain most of Elsie's whims, that was slightly too far.

Isla had lived with her aunt ever since she was a child. The kind woman had taken her in after her parents had disappeared one night. It was perhaps the greatest mystery that still made no sense to Isla. She had thought about her parents for years, but she was still no closer to understanding where they could have gone.

Elsie would fix her up a tincture that sent her back to sleep with no more dreams, although Isla would wake up feeling groggy rather than refreshed.

She hoped more than anything that her parents were alive, even if they had left her; she just wanted the promise that life was still flowing through their blood. But it was a promise that Elsie couldn't make to her.

Isla loved her life within the woods, and she felt as though she wouldn't change it for anyone, but she just wished that her parents would be able to see that she was doing all right.

She hopped over a large puddle as she approached the stream. Her foot caught on the edge of the water's surface and Isla felt small splashes of the cold water kissing her heels. She shuddered and continued around the slight bend to where the number of trees thinned out.

Isla was keeping her eyes peeled for the sight of the purple flowers that shot out of the ground and rose high. She'd always thought they looked like vibrant church bells, signaling to her that the leaves she needed were just below them.

Yet as she approached the stream, her eyes widened and she stopped in her tracks immediately. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest as her brown eyes widened, her body still but poised.

Her mouth hung open slightly as she stared at the figure before her. His eyes were closed, his body still, and from her position, she couldn't tell if he was breathing.

"Oh my god," Isla muttered as she quickly dropped her bag and rushed over to the man. "Excuse me, sir? Can ye hear me?"

The man gave no response, but as she approached him, prodding him with her fingers, Isla finally saw the rising and falling of his chest. It was slightly irregular, but it was still a better sign than if he wasn't breathing at all.

Isla thought about all that her aunt had taught her, and she quickly grabbed his wrist. She felt with her fingers on the underside of his arm for a pulse. The quickening tap against his skin was just as irregular as the way that he'd been breathing.

She spotted a cut on the side of his head and a scar across his brow. Whoever he was, Isla was starting to realize that he must be important. He was wearing a kilt of colors that she recognized, but she didn't keep up with the world outside of their forest enough to know who he was.

Most of his body was still in the stream, and so Isla worked quickly to pull him by his shoulders out of the water and onto the rocky bank where she was.

"Are ye all right? Can ye hear me?" she continued to ask him, but his eyes remained closed.

His hair was the kind of brown that reminded her of the forest floor; an amalgamation of leaves and dirt that had been pushed together to create one surface. Isla stared at his handsome face, feeling slightly spellbound by the attractiveness of the man in front of her. However,

she also felt rather intimidated since it wasn't every day that she would find a man like that in the woods.

The man was incredibly pale, and she started to realize that he probably had water in his system. Isla had no idea how to get the water from his lungs; she thought back to the times that she had seen her aunt helping people. There had been people with things trapped in their throats and her aunt had helped by hitting against their backs.

She didn't have time to think of a better alternative, and so Isla turned the man slightly onto his side and hit against his back.

"And again," she said, although more to herself since he still wasn't conscious. She bit her lip and pressed down on his back in quick succession, hoping that her actions would do something. "Come on," she muttered while continuing.

Isla was just about to give up when she felt his chest convulse, followed by the man coughing. She pushed him gently until he rolled onto his side, allowing a large amount of water out of his mouth. He coughed a little more and struggled for breath for a moment as Isla rubbed his back.

Her eyes were wide as she stared down at him. The vibrant blue of his unseeing eyes took her by surprise, they were large and almost bulging as they watered slightly. He stared up at the canopy above them for a moment before they started to roll back.

"No, no, no," Isla quickly sat up and shook him lightly. "Ye have to stay awake! Please, dinnae close yer eyes."

She started to hit his back a little in case there was still water that he had to expel, but it didn't seem that he had anymore within him. Just before he fully drifted back into the realm of unconsciousness, he uttered one word.

"Murder."

“I’ll be right back, I promise,” Isla murmured as she quickly straightened up and ran back the way that she’d come.

Isla ran as quickly as she could. Her legs were moving carefully so that she wouldn’t slip, but her eyes were ahead of her, making sure to dodge the trees.

All of a sudden, it felt as though the forest around her had come to life in a collective panic. Birds were whistling erratically from up above and the leaves blew around as though a storm was due. Isla winced at the branches that were ahead of her and put her arms up to protect her face.

“Lachlan!” she shouted while approaching his hut. She had tactfully skirted around her aunt’s cottage so as not to alarm her with her shouting. Isla knew that her aunt would already be helping other patients and would be torn about leaving them to come out into the wood. It was Isla’s job to go out and gather the herbs, and so she was the one that should deal with the issue.

But she knew that she wouldn’t be able to lift the man all the way back to the cottage on her own, and so she enlisted the help of her only friend who also lived so remotely. Lachlan was similar in age to Isla, and she had known him for the majority of her life. She thought about all of the memories that the two of them shared and how far back their friendship stretched. Isla knew that if there was one person who would be able to help her, it would be him.

“Lachlan!” she called again while nearing his cottage. It was a lot smaller than the one that she shared with her aunt, but he always seemed content with it.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he grumbled while stepping out into the morning sun. “It’s still early for normal folk like us.”

“Aye, I ken, and I’m sorry to disturb ye, but ye need to come now!”

“What is it?” he asked, suddenly much more alert. It was as though her words and urgent tone had knocked the sleepy grogginess from his voice. His dark hair still flopped over his brow, and it was evident that her words had dragged him out of sleep only moments before.

He eyed her wet dress, causing his brow to furrow even more than it already was.

“I’ve found a man in the woods and I need ye to help me carry him to the cottage,” Isla said quickly, ignoring the way that the confusion intensified on his expression.

For a moment Lachlan was poised as though he wasn’t going to help her, he was hesitating while standing still in his nightshirt.

“Let me get my boots,” he muttered quickly before turning around and disappearing into the darkness of his cottage, having not yet opened his shutters. “Where is this man? And how did ye find him?”

“I was just going to gather herbs when I found him by the stream. Well, he was actually slightly in the stream and-”

“Does he have a weapon on him?” Lachlan asked quickly as Isla showed him the route back to the mysterious man.

“He’s nae conscious, Lachlan, how would he be able to attack us?” Isla said with surprise. She hadn’t even thought about the possibility that he could be dangerous; she just knew that he needed help.

“I’m just being careful,” Lachlan grumbled from behind her.

“Watch out for the moss,” she called back to him while rushing ahead. “I dinnae want ye to slip and hit yer head too.”

“I’m fine,” he grumbled from behind her while continuing to keep up with her. “I’ve got to say, I did nae think that this would be how I would start my morning when I went to sleep last night. Rescuing

grown men from a stream.”

Isla could hear the way that Lachlan was grumbling; he had never been a morning person and would often be in a sour mood if he was woken with a start.

“He hit his head, I think,” Isla said while trying to defend the unconscious man. “I dinnae think he just decided to try and swim in the stream.”

His muttering became inaudible as Isla pushed on, blocking the incoming branches with her arms once more, but holding them for slightly longer to help Lachlan too.

They reached the stream quickly, and Isla was relieved to see that the man was still where she had left him. His chest was rising and falling heavily, but regularly, and relief washed over her as she saw that a little bit of color had returned to his previously pallid cheeks.

“This is him?” Lachlan asked while holding back slightly.

Isla had seen the sword that was sheathed at his waist, it was ornate and long. She had no doubts that it would be able to cut down both of them if the man was to come to and feel threatened.

“Nay, there are plenty of unconscious men on the banks of streams in our woods,” Isla remarked in a sarcastic tone.

“All right, I was just asking,” Lachlan said, holding his hands up in defense.

“Help me to get him up,” she said while beginning to hold him by his shoulders again.

Lachlan made no more complaints as he took the man’s legs and lifted them effortlessly. Isla was struggling slightly to hold onto him, her body unable to match the strength of a man’s, but she did her best to make sure that he was off of the ground.

The walk back to the cottage was a large struggle for both of them; while Isla was struggling with the weight of the man, Lachlan was struggling with his footing since he was walking backward.

“A little to yer left,” Isla said while trying to guide him. Her grip was constantly slipping as her hands grew slick with sweat, but she continued on while trying to ignore the groaning of the muscles in her arms. “Nay, the other left!”

“Which left?” Lachlan asked with a heavy sigh as he closed his eyes for a moment. “Do ye ken which is left and which is right?”

“Aye, but ye are backward and so yers are different to mine,” Isla said in her own defense. “All right, to yer right.”

They continued on like this for what felt like a small eternity. The rocky surface of the forest floor close to the stream posed enough issues without Lachlan having to blindly navigate his way through the trees. He would occasionally grunt as his shoulders bumped into trees and he would wince at the feeling of it, but still, he didn’t complain.

Finally, Isla could see the smoke coming from the chimney and a few people milling about outside of their cottage. They were no doubt patients that her aunt would be busy treating, but Isla knew that as soon as they walked through the door, the attention would be on the mysterious man in their arms.

“Where have ye been? I tell ye all the time to be quick when gathering-”

Elsie’s words were cut off upon seeing Lachlan and the man that Isla and he were carrying. Her eyes widened for a moment, but Isla quickly saw the way that she settled herself before her voice became incredibly calm.

“Set him down on the table there,” her aunt quickly pointed to the table in the kitchen. Isla and Lachlan heaved the heavy man onto the table while pushing its contents away from him to give him some space.

Elsie apologized to the woman that she had been talking with, but the current emergency was clearly going to take precedent against anyone else.

“What happened?” her aunt asked, tying back her hair quickly and glancing over the man.

“I found him in the stream,” Isla said and then proceeded to explain the same story she had told Lachlan. “There was water in his system, and I think he has hit his head.”

Her aunt’s eyes were scanning over the man as though trying to make a diagnosis of him, but her hands were already beginning to reach for certain materials that she was going to need.

Lachlan stepped back as Elsie started talking to her niece and ordering her around to get certain items. Isla suddenly felt rushed off her feet as she started to gather the necessary herbs and remedies that her aunt would use.

“I’m still going to need more foxglove though,” Elsie said after a while. “Will ye go and gather more?”

“But what about-”

“He’s going to be fine,” Elsie cut her off. “He’s breathing regularly, but this tincture will bring down his temperature. Lachlan, will ye build up the fire, I dinnae want him to catch a fever while he’s still wet.”

The cottage was suddenly alive with activity, but Isla felt strange leaving the man that she had found. She was worried for him, as though he wouldn’t pull through without her being around. She would have been lying to herself if she said that he wasn’t perhaps the most handsome man that she had ever seen, but she wasn’t about to admit that out loud to the room.

Instead, she reluctantly handed over some herbs before heading for the door to continue the task that she had been given that morning by her aunt.

It took several days before the man woke from his unconscious slumber. Isla had started to fit staring at him into her daily routine, and watching over him in the evenings had become a task that she took on without complaint.

She'd seen the way that Lachlan narrowed his eyes whenever he entered the cottage to see her by his side, but she ignored it. She and her aunt had moved the man to one of the beds that the very sick patients would normally take if they were too ill to leave the cottage. It was much more comfortable for him than the table.

Isla had started to wonder if he would ever wake up or if he'd traveled to a realm that he preferred to the life that he'd left behind. His breathing was constant, and his pallor had significantly improved since she had first found him out in the stream. He'd been as white as a sheet back then, whereas he now had a much healthier glow.

Isla had been daydreaming when he'd woken up. She'd stared at one of the walls so intensely that it had appeared as though there were swirls and dots patterned into the blank wall.

The man gasped while jolting back into consciousness, and the sudden movement caused Isla to jump so much that she yelped with surprise.

"Oh, ye are finally awake!" she gasped.

"What happened?!" he said, suddenly trying to sit up. "Where am I?"

"Shh," Isla muttered, knowing that her aunt was sleeping in the other room. "Ye are safe, I promise."

The man quickly stopped protesting so that he could wince and put a hand to his head. It was clear that he still had some recovering to do.

“I have something that I could give ye if ye have a headache?” Isla quickly offered the man, but he shook his head very slowly.

“Who are ye? How did I get here?” he continued with his questioning.

“I understand that ye must be very confused right now and that ye will have a lot of questions,” Isla said while sitting up in her seat.

She could feel her cheeks heating up slightly from the burn of his piercing gaze. His eyes were so captivating that she was forced to look down at her hands so that she wouldn’t get lost in them.

“I dinnae remember how I got here,” he muttered, lying back against the pillow.

“I found ye by the stream. Ye was barely breathing and had water in yer lungs, ye hit yer head too. We brought ye here and my aunt has been healing ye,” Isla explained, daring to look at him again.

The confusion on his face was evident, but it was still clear that Isla would have to do more explaining. They had taken off the shirt that he’d worn days ago so that he would be more comfortable, but Isla had made sure to keep it close to him for when he woke up.

“What is yer name?” she asked to fill the confused silence that had come over him.

“I... I...” the man frowned while staring down at himself in the bed. “I dinnae ken what my name is.”

For a moment, Isla thought that the man was playing some kind of trick on her. That he was managing to find a joke while in such a strange predicament.

“Ye dinnae ken what yer name is?” she asked, sitting back and pursing her lips. “Well, all I ken is that ye are from the McCann clan, right?”

“How do ye ken that?” the man asked in confusion once more.

“Well, the colors of yer kilt,” Isla said as though it were one of the more obvious pieces of information in the situation.

“Aye,” he mumbled. “Of course.”

“So how did ye-”

“Arran!”

Isla jumped slightly at the way that he sat up and called out the name. She placed a hand to his bare shoulder, fighting back the blush on her cheeks as she gave him a gentle push. He lay back, but his eyes were wide as they had been when she had first found him.

“Is that yer name?”

“Aye!” he nodded quickly. “It just came to me... I dinnae ken how. It came like a flash in front of my eyes, a moment of clarity.”

Isla blinked and waited a moment as she hesitated. The man was acting as though he were mad, and Isla wasn’t sure what to do about it. She’d seen her aunt treat many people who suffered from madness, but she was slightly disappointed to see that such a handsome man had also succumbed to the same fate.

“Do ye believe me?” he asked quickly. Something had changed on his face, and the expression was one that Isla couldn’t bear to deny.

“Aye, but how can ye have forgotten yer name?” she asked while running a hand through her dark hair.

“Ye said that I hit my head, aye?”

Of course, she thought to herself.

“Can ye remember anything else, Arran of Clan McCann?” she asked, leaning forward slightly.

The man before her frowned for a moment as she willed him to try and think hard about what had happened. However, Isla found that her heart dropped upon seeing him shake his head.

“Nay, only my name.”

Isla was silent for a moment as she thought about his words and what that would mean for him.

“Well, ye keep trying to remember things, aye?” she said, managing a small smile.

Isla knew that she would have to wake her aunt soon since she would want to speak with Arran herself. She couldn’t believe that the man had lost his memories, and she couldn’t imagine what that must be like to go through.

He looked so innocent and harmless, yet she remembered Lachlan’s cautious tone when they had approached him. His sword was in the cottage, although away from him, but Isla was sure that Arran wouldn’t even be able to remember that he owned a sword.



Arran stared at the beautiful woman as she stepped away from him for a moment. Her eyes were the same dark pools that he had seen when he’d woken up in the forest. He had no memory of how he’d got there, but all he’d remembered seeing was the bright light of the morning being shadowed by a woman.

At first, he had thought that she was an angel that had been sent to ease his passing. But he was very much still alive, and now he was starting to realize that she was simply a woman with a very kind soul.

His mind felt like a vast plain that had been ravaged by an army. Like a plain that was left with no remnant of what it used to look like, just a field of mud and destruction. Arran felt his frustration building as he tried to sift through the sands of his mind to find anything that he could remember, but there was nothing.

He could hear the echoes of old conversations haunting him, but he didn’t know what they meant or who was even speaking. Isla had said that he belonged to the McCann clan, but he wasn’t even sure what that meant.

His frustration was almost unbearable, but he knew that there was nothing he could do about it.

“What is yer name?” Arran asked as the beautiful woman turned around to stare at him. Her hair flowed like a curving river, but it was her eyes that he couldn’t take his gaze off of.

“Isla,” she said, flashing him a small smile. “I would suggest that ye get some rest, it may help with bringing back yer memories.”

“Isla,” he repeated her name, causing her to turn back to face him. “Thank ye for saving my life.”

Arran watched her until she left him alone in the room. He didn’t even know where he was, be it a village or a large town, but from the small window, he could see lots of trees and greenery as daylight started to break.

While he couldn’t remember anything from his past, he took Isla’s name in his mind and held onto it tightly. He was going to remember everything from now on and not let anything go. He didn’t like the way that it felt as though his mind was betraying him, as though he had been locked out of his own thoughts.

He tried resting his eyes for a while, but he couldn’t sleep anymore. His body felt stiff, and he knew that he must have been out for at least a few days, although he really had no concept of time. He wondered if there was anyone out there that was missing his presence.

The image of his parents floated up for a moment in his mind, but their faces were blurred. It was as though he had been staring at a painting, but someone had poured water over the faces, distorting the paint and erasing the important details.

Arran gave up trying to make out their features as he stared up at the ceiling. Wooden beams were supporting the ceiling; they swirled patterns in their surface, and he instead focused on them. It felt easy to see the things around them and log them within his memories. Arran just couldn’t understand why he couldn’t do the same with his old memories.

He thought back to the one word that Isla told him he’d said when he woke up the first time. Murder. He couldn’t even remember why he’d said it or what bearing it had on him. But Arran knew that he wouldn’t have just said the word for no reason. His eyes narrowed as he knew that he would have to think a little harder on the subject.

“He’s suffering from memory loss,” her aunt said as Isla helped her to hang up some sheets outside of the cottage.

“So he cannae remember anything about his life?” Isla said with a slight wince. It was only a few hours since he’d woken up and she had spoken with him briefly.

“Aye, he cannae remember even basic things. But he remembered his name, and that’s a good sign,” Elsie said while stretching to hang up the top corners of a sheet.

“Has he woken up yet?” A new voice joined the conversation.

Isla turned to see that Lachlan was before them and in much smarter attire than the last time that she had seen him in his nightshirt.

“Aye, he woke up this morning,” she said as she walked over to him.

“What’s the issue?” Lachlan asked, staring between the two women.

“The man is called Arran,” Isla started. “But he hit his head on the rocks by the stream, and now he cannae remember anything else about who he is or where he comes from.”

“But we ken that he’s from the McCann clan,” Lachlan said quickly.

“Aye,” Isla nodded. “I told him that, but it seems to mean nothing to him.”

“How can ye just forget everything about yerself,” Lachlan said, shaking his head. “Is he staying here with ye?”

“Aye, of course, he is,” Isla said. She wasn’t sure what had gotten into him, as she saw the way that his lips were pursed and his fists clenched slightly. “We would be cruel to send him back out into the world with nay idea of who he really is.”

“Why dinnae ye just take him back to his clan and have them deal with it?”

Isla narrowed her eyes as she noticed how bothered Lachlan seemed to be with Arran’s presence, but she thought that it would be wiser to not say anything about it.

“Because we have taken him into our house with the obligation of healing him. It would be morally wrong to send him to a clan where he cannae remember anyone. He would have to speak with strangers all day, at least he now knows us.”

“Aye, really?” Lachlan said with a slight snort. “What if he’s lying and he’s a criminal who is trying to flee?”

It was Isla’s turn to scoff at him. She shook her head and scowled at her friend, she knew that Lachlan didn’t like it when they went to the nearest town and she had to speak with other men. But that was normally something that she was able to ignore.

“Friends dinnae act like this,” she said before turning on her heels and entering the house. Isla could feel Lachlan’s narrowed eyes on her as she went.

“Would ye like anything to eat?” she asked, stepping into the cottage.

Arran was sitting up and looked a lot better than he had done over the past few days. Isla found herself having to avoid looking down at his bare chest. It was so toned and smooth, but she quickly bit her lip and busied herself in the kitchen area.

Her thoughts were a mess as she tried not to steal too many glances over in his direction, but each time she did, Isla realized that he was staring back at her.

“Aye,” he nodded with a smile on his face. “That would be great.”

"I'll fix ye something up," Isla muttered.

She worked quickly, feeling his gaze on her, but it was a comfort of sorts. He was looking at her, and it reminded her of the time that she had saved a baby squirrel on the forest floor. The squirrel had been looking to her as though she were the one that would make everything all right, she would be able to solve all of its strife by just being around.

"So, this is yer house?" Arran asked as Isla started to cut some bread.

"Aye, I've lived in this cottage with my aunt since I was a child," she said while working.

"It's very... homely," he commented, causing her to chuckle.

"I ken that it's nae to everyone's taste," she said. "But this is our home, and I would nae have it any other way. My aunt has always been... different from other people who live in this area. She's a healer, and the way of life for a healer is a lot different from the way of life for the people in the nearby towns."

"Yer aunt has always been a healer?" Arran asked.

"I think so, at least for as long as I've known her," Isla nodded.

"What about yer parents?"

She let the question hang in the air for a while. Isla was used to thinking and wondering about where they were, but she hadn't voiced those thoughts for a very long time. She didn't speak to Lachlan about it, and she knew that her aunt would only grow upset with her if she were to mention them.

"They disappeared when I was very young," she started to explain. "I dinnae ken where they went... nobody does. Well, I'm sure that there is someone out there who has an idea of where they are, but I'm left to guess. After they disappeared, I was sent here to live with my aunt."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Arran muttered. "That must be awful to not ken where they are."

“Aye, but I’ve had years to think of every scenario.” Isla brushed it off. “And I dinnae mind living here with my aunt; she has always raised me as though I were her own. She didnae have to do this for me.”

“I wish that I could remember who my parents were,” Arran mumbled while looking down at his hands. Isla stole a glance as some of his hair flopped in front of his eyes. Even in such a disheveled state, he still managed to look so attractive that she couldn’t comprehend how he did it. He bit his lip, and Isla found her thoughts drifting off to images of her biting his lip. She wanted to lean forward and kiss him, though she knew that it wouldn’t exactly be proper.

She shifted as her thoughts darkened to lying next to the man in front of her. Isla looked away from his face, but it was his hands that caught her eye. She could feel her cheeks heating as she tried to look at him once more and respond to what he had said.

“I’m sure that yer memories will return to ye,” she smiled reassuringly over at him. “And if there’s anyone good enough to help ye, I ken that my aunt will be able to help ye. She is very renowned for her healing abilities.”

“But this is nae just a physical ailment,” Arran said with a sigh. “The cut on the back of my head has already started to scab over, but I dinnae ken how long it will take for me to remember. What if I never remember?”

“We need to have hope in such times,” she reminded him in a soft voice.

“Aye,” Arran nodded, letting his eyes close for a moment.

“Do ye think that ye are of noble birth?” Isla continued to ask the questions that had been burning in her mind for the past few days.

“I dinnae ken,” he said, frowning. “What would make ye ask that?”

She thought of the embellished sword that clearly belonged to someone important, but she remembered Lachlan’s warning about Arran becoming dangerous. She didn’t want to risk the danger of letting him know that there was a weapon within the house.

“Yer kilt,” she said rather too quickly. “I dinnae think that just a man

traveling from town to town would wear a kilt.”

“Did I have a horse?” Arran asked with a furrowed brow.

“Nay,” Isla responded. “At least, nae when I found ye.”

She saw his head dip slightly at her comment since it would have been a good clue as to who he really was.

“I could have had a horse though,” he muttered more to himself than to her.

Isla served him a rather modest plate of food; it was just some fresh bread with a thin soup that her aunt had let sit for a while. The broth would at least give him some strength though, which she knew he was going to need to get his memories back.

“Do ye think that I would be able to walk around soon?” he asked carefully after accepting the soup.

Isla hesitated while staring down at him. While in the bed, he was harmless and couldn’t do anything that would be dangerous.

“I will have to ask my aunt,” Isla said, still wary of him. She didn’t want to believe that someone so handsome could harm her, but she also didn’t want to be caught out for being too careful.

“Aye, of course,” Arran nodded, although he wasn’t able to hide his disappointment too much.

“It may be too early for ye to be walking around for too long,” she continued to explain. “Ye must have hit yer head very hard to be suffering from memory loss, and standing up could make ye dizzy. The last thing we want is for ye to hit yer head again now, isn’t it?”



His first few steps were shaky and incredibly hesitant. Arran tried to ignore the way that both Isla and her aunt were watching him. At first, they had both stood back to see if he would be able to handle this on his own. He wanted to be able to walk without relying on either of the kind women. However, Isla had stepped in as he held

onto the wall for a little more support.

“Here, hold onto my shoulder,” she said while gently guiding his arm. He paused for a moment, feeling his skin tingle under her touch. He suppressed a shudder that ran down his spine, but he felt as though he never wanted the moment to end. The feeling of her touch on his arm was only small, but it made him want more of her to touch him.

“Thank ye,” Arran managed to mutter, feeling as though he were under a spell from her beauty. He winced slightly at the panging pain in the back of his head but promptly tried to ignore it as his heart beat a little faster.

“How are ye feeling?” Isla asked as she slowly let him go.

“My head hurts,” he murmured, trying to focus on walking forward.

“Ye need to take it easy over the next few days,” Elsie spoke up from where she was sitting at the kitchen table. “I dinnae want ye to undo all of the healing that ye have been doing by resting.”

“Aye, I’m all right.” Arran tried to brush it off. A crushing feeling was coming over him as he tried to ignore the stabbing pain in the back of his head. “I’m fine,” he grunted.

“All right, I think that’s enough standing for one day,” Isla said as she started to guide him back toward the bed.

Arran was fed up with lying down, and he thought that once he was up, he would be happy to stay up. However, he was suddenly feeling faint and welcomed the bed that rose up to meet him. The pain was mingling with frustration as he lay down against the soft pillow, wishing nothing more than to be able to get up and walk around like normal.

Isla was being so kind to him that he was finding it difficult to fault her, and the thought of having to leave her was one that he didn’t welcome. He couldn’t remember who he was or where he’d come from, but the one thing that Arran was sure of was that the cottage in the woods was not his home.

Jonah walked through the halls of the castle with urgency in his pace. He ran a hand through his blond hair that turned a glimmering white when catching the light of the torches in their brackets. His eyes were narrowed and his face set hard as he thought about the news that weighed down on the McCann clan that evening.

There were people talking within the clan about what would be done or how they would resolve the issue that had fallen at their feet. Jonah continued through the empty halls, the sound of his footsteps bouncing off of the bare walls, until he reached the great hall.

“The Laird’s family are nae to be disturbed,” the guard murmured to him.

Jonah had never exactly taken kindly to being told no, and there would be no stopping him that night as he knew that he would need to speak with the family.

His brow was knitted firmly, casting dark shadows over his eyes as his hand delved into his pocket to retrieve a few coins.

“At this point, I am basically family,” he responded back quickly while pressing the coins into the guard’s palm. “Let’s nae say any more on the subject, aye?”

It was the same way that he had managed to work himself up from such humble beginnings in life. Jonah had wriggled through the ranks, and he had done so by being cunning.

The doors opened to reveal the Laird’s younger brother and sister sitting at the table of the great hall.

“Colton, Keira, I’m so sorry for yer loss,” Jonah said while clasping his hands behind his back and bowing his head to the two of them. Colton and Keira Woods were the epitome of misery as they stared at the new arrival to the room.

Colton stood from his seat as he stared at Jonah. The younger lad’s eyes were set with dark rings underneath them. Jonah knew that it had been a tough time for them both. The sullen expressions that he was met with were exactly what he had been expecting, but it was still difficult to see.

“I hope that ye will both be all right after this. I cannae imagine what ye are going through,” he continued.

“I just cannae believe it,” Keira murmured from where she was sitting still. She was staring at the table, and she may have only been talking to herself, but her words caught both of the men’s attention.

“Obviously we are now going to have to start making the necessary preparations in terms of what to do next for the clan.” Jonah turned his gaze back to Colton.

He looked so much like his brother, although his hair was slightly darker, and he was a little shorter, too. There was a numb look in his eyes as though he had already been through all that grief could throw at him and was now empty.

“I cannae accept that my brother is dead without having his body to prove it,” Colton spoke slowly. His fists were clenched, and Jonah could tell that the stubborn young man would be stuck in his ways.

“With all due respect,” Jonah began, bowing his head once more. “How are ye going to find him if he was killed in the woods? There is so much ground to cover, and the forest is a thick and dense place. It would be incredibly lucky for ye to find him.”

“I cannae just accept that he is dead,” Colton shook his head. “If it were the other way around, I ken that my brother would go looking for me.”

“Should ye nae give this more thought?” Jonah asked, taking a step closer. “Ye cannae just leave this clan with nay leader for so long; there are things that need attending to.”

“And they will be attended to upon my brother’s return,” Colton said.

“What do ye think of this?” Jonah asked, turning to the youngest of the siblings. Keira merely shook her head at first, giving a light shrug of her shoulders.

“I want to believe that he’s alive, I really do,” she said, staring between both of them. Her eyes were red and inflamed. Jonah doubted that either of the siblings had slept properly in days.

“I cannae just sit here and wait for news,” Colton said as he turned to Jonah. “I want to go and find him myself.”

“I ken that ye want to try and help yer brother, but there is a large chance that he’s been killed out there. Do ye really want to go out on a hunt that will lead ye nowhere?”

“I will never be able to live with myself if I just accept that he’s gone,” Colton said while running a hand through his dark curls. “It does nae feel right.”

“What does yer mother say to all of this?” Jonah asked.

“She is heartbroken,” Colton responded. “She will nae leave her chambers, and I dinnae want to distress her anymore by speaking of the future of the clan.”

“I understand that it will be an incredibly difficult time for ye and yer family. Arran was a good man, but we will have to start making some... arrangements.”

“What kind of arrangements?” Colton narrowed his eyes. “I will nae be having a funeral for my brother without his body. It just does nae feel right, and until I see it, I will continue to believe that he’s out there somewhere.”

“This clan will quickly fall to ruin without a leader,” Jonah warned him. “If ye are going to carry out this childish hope of yers to find yer brother, then I’m going to have to speak with yer mother to sort things out properly.”

“I will be back as quickly as I can be,” Colton argued. “I have some

men ready to go today. I will find him soon, I know it.”

“This clan needs a leader, or it will fall into ruin. Ye will have people coming from everywhere demanding their rightful claim to the Lairdship,” Jonah said. He knew that he was going to have to help the family, who were clearly too struck with grief to do anything.

“I just ken that he’s out there, Jonah.” Colton’s voice was smaller as he spoke. “I ken that he is nae dead, and I want to bring him back to us. He could be injured somewhere, or perhaps he could be captured. But I cannae believe that he has been taken from us completely.”

Keira was sniffing once more, using a handkerchief to dry her face as she wept as silently as she could from the table.

“Dinnae worry, sister,” Colton reassured her. “I will bring him back to us.”

“I just want ye to be safe too,” Keira said. “I cannae lose both of my brothers.”

“Ye will nae,” he said. “I will return with Arran, and that will be the end of it. He’s out there somewhere, and I will find him.”

“I will go to yer mother about this,” Jonah warned as he stared between the two younger siblings.

“I dinnae care, ye cannae stop me from going,” Colton said. “I will return with my brother, and he will resume his duties as Laird.”

“And in the meantime?”

“There will be nay need for a replacement in the meantime,” Colton said, staring rather curtly at Jonah.

The older man felt his lip twitch slightly, but he refrained from allowing his expression to turn into a sneer as Colton left the room. He knew that there was nothing he could do to convince the younger Woods brother that Arran was most likely dead.

“Ye have my support, my lady, should ye need it in these hard times,” Jonah said as he bowed to Keira.

“Thank ye, Jonah,” Keira managed a slight smile. “Ye have always been kind and good to our family.”

“I will leave ye with yer grief now,” he said, beginning to turn around for the exit. “I will be in my chambers if ye need me.”

Almost two weeks had passed since Arran awoke and couldn't remember who he was or where he had come from. He was slowly recovering and was able to walk around and start to do things for himself once more. It was a rather slow process, but he was finally starting to feel well enough to help around the cottage.

Elsie and Isla had shown him nothing but kindness and compassion ever since he had woken up, and he wanted to be able to repay them by helping out. His coordination had been awful the first few times that he had walked around the small cottage. Arran had felt like a giant that was just destroying anything delicate in sight without even meaning to.

However, they slowly started to get into a routine, and it was one that he was starting to enjoy.

"I'm nae sure what I did before this," Arran began one morning. He left early with Isla to help her gather up the herbs that her aunt would need for the day. "But I really do enjoy gathering herbs in the morning."

"I'm almost confident that it's nae what ye would have been doing in yer old life," Isla chuckled. He laughed too, although the more that he thought about it, the more that he wasn't sure what would happen when his memories returned.

"What's wrong?" she asked while bending down to cut some greenery around the stream. It was close to where she had found him, and Arran often realized that he would have probably died in that spot if it wasn't for her.

"I was just thinking about what happens if my memories return," he

said with a shrug.

“They will,” Isla corrected him.

“Aye, but if they do, am I just going to have to go back to my old life? Whatever I was doing, I cannae imagine it being as calming and peaceful as the life that ye and yer aunt live. I would love to stay out here in the forest for the rest of my life and just live simply.”

“Well, ye may nae feel the same way when ye remember the life that ye were living before this. Ye may have goals to fulfill and people who expect things of ye,” Isla said with a shrug.

“I dinnae think that I would have been that important,” Arran shrugged it off.



Isla cast her mind back to his sword that she'd found. Whoever he was, he was certainly important enough for an embellished sword. She bit her lip at the thought of him not wanting to leave the life that they had in the forest.

Isla would have been lying if she'd said that her heart hadn't fluttered at the thought of getting to remain there with Arran for the rest of her days. Now that he was up and moving more every day, she could properly take in just how handsome he was.

He was broad and clearly very strong, but she had to keep reminding herself not to think of him too much. His hands looked so skillful, and his fingers caused her to flush whenever she caught herself staring for too long.

“Ye need to be careful with how much ye stare at that man,” her aunt had said to her one evening. She had caught her niece staring out of the window as Arran gathered firewood.

He had started joining her every morning to get some herbs from the forest floor. Isla had taught him how to forage and how to know what to look for.

“Did Elsie say that we needed more foxglove?” Arran asked as she

straightened up, a small smile finding its way onto her face. "What are ye smiling for?"

"Nothing," Isla shook her head. "It's just, that's what I was looking for when I found ye. I forgot for almost a day after we carried ye to the cottage that I needed foxglove."

"Well then, we'll get plenty of it, more than Elsie needs," Arran announced with a wide smile.

"Nay, there's an important rule that we live by," Isla stopped him by touching his arm. Her heart felt as though it had stopped for a moment as she realized how strange it felt to touch him. She quickly averted her gaze as her cheeks heated up.

"What is it?"

"We never take more than we need," Isla recited. "We live with this forest, nae against it. We take what we need, but never too much. We let things grow and we help with a little upkeep."

She saw the way that he was looking at her, and Isla couldn't quite place what that look was. His gaze was intense, but there was still the hint of a smile on his lips as he nodded slowly.

"Aye, then we will take nay more than we need." He nodded and continued over to where he could see the purple flowers growing.

Isla watched how easily he was able to move around the forest now that his head had healed. The physical cut would leave a scar that his hair would hide, but there were still his memories that were yet to return to him. She felt awful that in keeping him within the confines of their lives, they were starving him of whatever his real purpose was.

Isla thought about what he was meant to do in life and what that could possibly entail. The more that she spent time with Arran, the more that Isla hoped he wouldn't be too important. She wanted him to stay with her always, even if it was a rather selfish thought to have.

"I have nae seen much of yer other friend since I woke up?" Arran asked as she moved to join him by the foxglove.

“Lachlan?”

“Aye, the one who helped get me to the cottage?” he asked and turned to her.

“That’s Lachlan,” she nodded. “I dinnae ken why he’s been so distant; he is usually around a lot more than this.”

“Is he well? I want to find a way to show my thanks to him for what he’s done,” Arran explained.

“Ye dinnae have to do that,” Isla chuckled. “He only helped me carry ye to the cottage, I’m sure that he will think nothing of it.”

They started to head back in the direction that they had come from. Isla led the way, making sure to be careful on the slippery stones. The moss clung to them with an iron force, that no matter how many times she scraped it off to make the path safer, it returned with a vengeance.

“Be careful in some of these areas, it can be quite-”

Isla’s words were cut off by a yelp of surprise from her as her feet slipped out from under her, causing her balance to fail. She scrunched her eyes shut and braced for the impact of the uneven ground, but it never came.

Instead, she opened her eyes to find that two strong arms had caught her before she could hit the ground. For a moment, it felt as though the world around her had frozen. Isla stared up at him with wide eyes, unable to move in his hold.

Her lips were slightly parted as she stared at him, blinking a few times to make sure that he really had caught her and she wasn’t in a dream, but he really was there with her.

“Thank ye,” she muttered, ignoring the way that her heart hammered against her chest. She hoped more than anything that he couldn’t feel how quickly the beating in her chest was going.

“It’s all right,” he said, although his voice was but a murmur. Like a whisper on the wind that one had to strain to hear. Yet as clear as

day, she watched the way that his eyes darted down to her lips, before returning her gaze in an instant.

She could feel her throat tightening, as though she had eaten the wrong berry in the forest and would now pay the price for her carelessness. Her mind was still struggling to catch up with the fact that she was in his arms and staring up at him. She realized that she wanted him to kiss her, and she wanted that more than anything.

“Ah, it’s good to see that ye are back on yer feet.” A new voice severed through the moment as though someone had swung Arran’s sword. She felt him jolt slightly, and Isla quickly wriggled out of his arms to turn around. She knew in an instant who the voice belonged to, but she wasn’t sure how he would feel about what he’d just seen.

“Lachlan,” Arran said, stepping forward. “It’s good to see ye again now that I have my strength back and can thank ye properly.”

“Forget it,” Lachlan said with a shrug. She saw the way that his gaze was burning, as though his hazel eyes were on fire.

Arran stopped short with his good mood and extended thanks, and Isla could see a frown developing over his features as he tried to understand why Lachlan was so angry. Isla was already beginning to piece it together, and she could feel her gut twisting.

“Lachlan,” she called as her best friend turned and walked off. “Lachlan, wait!” She turned back to see Arran trying to get her attention, but she knew that she had to talk with her friend first. “Take this, and I’ll meet ye back at the cottage?”

“Aye,” Arran nodded, although she could see the disappointment in his strong features.

“Lachlan!”

“Leave me alone,” he grumbled as she managed to catch up to him.

“Please tell me why ye are so upset,” she said, struggling to keep up with his pace.

“Ye would nae understand.” He shook his head. “And I dinnae want to

talk about it with ye.”

Isla walked by his side while biting her lip. It was clear that he wasn't going to go into any details about the way that he was feeling, but she still would have liked it if he'd been a little less harsh with his tone.

“Arran just wanted to thank ye,” she whispered.

“And ye ken what?” Lachlan said as his own cottage started to get larger the closer they were to it. “I wish we'd just left him at the stream if I'd have known that this would happen.”

“Nothing has happened!” she fired back at him. “And I ken that ye dinnae wish that. He would have died if we'd left him there, and then ye would have felt incredibly guilty.”

“Nay, I dinnae think I would have,” he muttered before storming ahead to get to his house.

“Come back here and talk to me. I'm yer friend, I want to make sure that ye are all right,” Isla called.

“That's exactly why I cannae talk with ye right now,” he fired back over his shoulder as he kept walking.

“Lachlan!”

“I'll speak to ye another time. I'm nay good to talk to right now.”

Isla stood on her own in the forest for a moment. She had never felt so conflicted about what to do, and she'd never been put in a situation like that before. Her breathing was irregular from trying to keep up with Lachlan's pace as he walked through the forest, and she wiped her forehead with her sleeve as she turned on her heels.



“Is he all right?” Arran asked as soon as the door opened. Isla only shrugged and shook her head in response to his question. It was clear that she didn't want to talk about it and so he didn't press it any further.

"I'm sure that he will be fine." Elsie brushed it off from where she sat at the table. Whatever she was brewing held a distinct scent of lavender and something else that was a little sharper. Arran turned his attention back to Isla; his thoughts had remained on their moment before it had been interrupted. He wished that Lachlan had chosen another time to venture out and find them because if he'd had only a moment more, he would have kissed her.

Even just thinking about his lips against hers sent his mind reeling, but he quickly sat up a little straighter and pursed his lips while taking in the sight of Isla. She wore very plain dresses that were clearly more for practical use than anything else, but he didn't mind. Since living with the two women, he also wore cotton shirts and trousers that cut off just above his ankles. They were the only clothes that just about fit him, but Arran was fine with that.

"I dinnae ken, he seemed really upset about something," Isla said as she played with the ends of her hair. Arran had noticed that it was a habit she tended to have when she was nervous or anxious about something.

"Ye just need to give him time. If he did nae want to talk with ye today, he may be willing to listen to ye tomorrow," Elsie said as she continued to stir her pot. "Did ye get the herbs that I asked for?"

"Aye, they're here," she muttered, taking her bag off of her shoulder to give to her aunt. "I'm going to my room for a while. I dinnae want to be disturbed."

Arran watched her go, his eyes not leaving her until the door shut behind her. He felt slightly hurt that she didn't want to see him straight away, but he understood that her friend had clearly been upset about something, and that was now weighing on her too.

"It'll be all right," Elsie said as he met her gaze. "She'll come out in a while, I'm sure."

"I hope that I havenae upset her friend; he seems like a good man," Arran admitted to her. There was something comforting about Elsie that made him feel as though he could tell her anything. She held something in her presence that reassured him, and he liked that very much.

“Lachlan has always been good to us, but sometimes he does become trapped in his feelings. He just needs some time to cool off, but he will be fine.”

“I hope that ye are right,” Arran sighed heavily.

Isla had been meaning to go and see Lachlan for the next few days, but her aunt had been inundated with patients that had kept the three of them incredibly busy. She winced at the way that things had been left between them, and she knew that she needed to talk to him. It had almost been as though her aunt hadn't wanted her to go and had been keeping her busy with various tasks when she would let Arran rest.

That afternoon, Isla emerged from her room after taking a short break from tending to a fever. The woman was from a nearby village, and the fever had finally broken after a long fight all morning. She was resting in the bed that Arran had once used.

"Where is Arran?" Isla asked as she sat down by Elsie.

"I sent him out to collect some things," she said with a simple shrug. "Have ye seen Lachlan recently?"

"Nay," Isla shook her head. "I want to, but we have been so busy and-"

"Ye ken why he was upset?" her aunt asked.

"I... I think so?"

Isla thought about it for a moment; she thought about how close she had become to Arran since he had woken up, and how she really wasn't spending too much time around him ever since.

"He just needs some reassurance, I think," Elsie said with a small smile. "He's probably feeling cast out."

"I cannae help that. Arran's here and I want to make sure that he gets his memories back," Isla said in her own defense.

"Do ye really, though?"

Her aunt's question caught her by surprise. Elsie was staring at her with bright eyes, but they were the kind that was all-seeing, and nothing could get past them. Isla would have been lying to herself if she had said that she had considered the benefits of Arran not getting his memories back.

"Does that make me a bad person?" she asked with a slight wince.

"Nay," her aunt chuckled and rubbed her arm. "It makes ye exactly like the rest of us. I've seen the way that he looks at ye, and even the way that ye look at him. If he were to never remember his life, then ye could both go on living like this. But he may have someone waiting for him back home. He may have someone he is betrothed to, or perhaps he's already married."

Isla blushed and looked down at the thought of that. She didn't want to imagine that there was anyone else in the world that could feel the way that she felt about him.

"I ken that it is careless of me to nae want him to remember; it is harsh and unfair," Isla sighed heavily. "But I do really like him; I think he is perhaps the most handsome man that I have ever seen."

"Ye should nae feel bad for yer feelings, lass," her aunt said. "But ye should be careful that they dinnae hurt other people's feelings too."

"What do ye mean?"

"Have ye ever really seen the way that Lachlan looks at ye?"

Isla stopped as she heard the question. She could feel her heart beginning to sink at the thought of him being upset about that. She winced when she cast her mind back to how he'd found her in Arran's arms. It must have been like a dagger to his heart.

"How have I found myself in such a situation?" Isla groaned while rising from the table. "I never wanted to hurt anybody."

“Not many people do, but it will still hurt him, I’m afraid,” Elsie said with a sympathetic smile on her face.

“I hope he will still want to be my friend,” Isla said as she thought about the years of friendship that they had already shared together. “I cannae imagine my life without Lachlan, he has always been by my side.”

“Aye, I hope that he will stick by ye,” Elsie nodded. “Right, I need to get back to work; we have people to tend to. Will ye finish making those tinctures over there?”

Isla got to work straight away, glad to have the various tasks that would distract her reeling mind for a while.



Arran paused outside of the cottage, he had almost picked her flowers, but then he’d thought that it would be too much. He bit his lip and tried to think about what he wanted to say to her, all of the things that would make her heart race as well as his. He wanted to tell her that she was such a fair and beautiful woman, that he loved how gentle and caring she was.

They had only known one another for a short amount of time, and while his memories hadn’t returned, he liked the new life that he had for himself. Of course, it still played on his mind that he may suddenly be struck with the memories of his past in an instant, and then everything would change. He wondered about who his parents were and whether there was anyone else that could bring him such joy in his life.

Arran couldn’t imagine that there would be anyone else that could make him smile the way that Isla did. It felt like an impossible feat.

He sighed heavily and thought about how he was going to tell her that he wanted to kiss her, that he wanted to make her as happy as she made him. It made his stomach flutter with happiness as he quickly took the various plants over to Elsie. Isla was in the room; he could see her out of the corner of his eye as he entered the cottage, but he knew that he had to act natural.

“Thank ye, Arran.” Elsie smiled up at him as he quickly unloaded the

bag. "Isla, I told ye to make the tinctures."

"Aye, I have," she said, waving it off. He turned to see that she was approaching him.

"If they are nae of good quality, I'll have ye making them for a week," her aunt said with narrowed eyes.

Isla brushed off her aunt's comments as she walked right up to Arran and smiled at him a little bashfully.

"I was wondering if ye would like to take a stroll with me, only a brief one?" Arran offered, trying to ignore the waver in his voice.

"Of course," Isla nodded quickly, ignoring her aunt's sighs. "I'll be needed here afterward, though."

"Dinnae venture too far," her aunt called to them both as they were already out of the door.

"How has yer day been so far?" he asked once they were out and walking down one of the many paths in the forest.

"It has been tiring," Isla admitted. "The past few days have been; it seems that every sick person in the area has come to my aunt for aid."

"She is good at what she does," Arran nodded. "She may even work too hard though, she leaves nae much time for herself."

"Aye, I have told her this," Isla chuckled.

Arran could feel his nerves building as he stared at her perfect lips. This was the moment that he wanted to do it. He wanted to show her exactly how he made her feel.

"Isla, there's something that I have to tell ye," Arran said as he stopped walking and turned to face her.

"What is it?" she asked, a frown coming over her face. "Can ye remember anything new?"

"Nay," he quickly shook his head. The worry on her expression

lessened slightly, but it was clearly still troubling her as to what he would say. "I cannae remember anything but my name still, although my dreams are still of people that I dinnae ken. I think they could be my family, but their faces are still nae clear."

"I'm sure that ye will remember soon," she reassured him.

"Aye, but I also ken that I will regret nae saying this now for years to come," he said, clearing his throat.

"Saying what?"

"That I think ye are the most beautiful woman in the world," he announced with a small smile. His hands slowly took hers so that they were facing each other and even closer than before. "I ken that I cannae remember much, and that it will be something that I'll just have to learn to live with. But no matter what happens, I really do like ye, Isla."

"I think ye are a very handsome man, too," she said with a slight smile on her face. The blush in her cheeks was back, and Arran liked the way that he could have that effect on her.

Before she could say another word, Arran decided that the moment had arrived. He inhaled nervously, scared that she would reject him or think that he was being too rash in his actions. However, as he started to lean in, he noticed that Isla was doing the same thing. She smiled until her lips met with his, and Arran allowed his body to move even closer to hers.

Feeling her wrapped in his arms was something that brought him a great comfort. His lips moved against hers in a slow and intimate kiss, her arms were resting around his neck, and their chests were flush together. It felt so good to finally be able to act on his feelings, and Arran was just so pleased that Isla clearly felt the same way.

He felt as though nothing could have ruined that moment. He felt on top of the world, and as though he had won something that nobody else would even get the chance to fight for. Relief washed through him that a beautiful woman like Isla was pressing her lips to his, but he was suddenly pulled away, and not willingly.

"Get away from her!"

Isla's eyes were wide as she stared at Lachlan. She could see the rage in his expression as he glared at Arran. His fists were clenched and his jaw set.

"Lachlan, what are ye doing here?" she asked as he finally turned his attention to her.

"I was on my way to talk to ye, but it seems that ye were busy anyway," he said, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry," Isla's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Why are ye sorry? That I saw this?" he asked with a scoff.

"Lachlan, it's all right," Arran said, holding his hands up to show that there was no need for anger in the situation.

"Nay, because ye have barely known her for a few weeks," he snapped back at Arran, daring to step towards him. "Ye have nae been there for her like I have for my entire life. Ye dinnae love her as I do."

"Stop this, please!" Isla said as the two men grew even closer to one another.

"She is free to have her own feelings," Arran responded to him. "If she loved ye, then she would nae have kissed me."

"Arran," she narrowed her eyes at him. He realized how wrong he'd been, but before he could say another word, Lachlan pushed him.

"I'm nae going to fight ye," he said, staring at Lachlan.

Arran's words were clearly angering him as he growled and threw himself at Arran once more. The two men continued this; Arran was trying to dodge him as Lachlan continued to try and fight with him.

"Stop this!" Isla called again as Lachlan threw a punch at him. It narrowly missed, but it was a turning point as Arran started to fight back. He grunted and pushed at Lachlan, clearly the stronger of the two. "Please, you're going to hurt one another."

"Ye dinnae get to say those things," Lachlan growled as he kicked Arran in the gut. He stumbled back and grunted, but managed to regain his balance. "Ye dinnae get to be the one to have her. I love her, and she was meant to be mine!"

Isla couldn't believe what she was hearing as she watched the two men exchange blows over and over again. She wanted to jump in between them, but she was terrified of getting hurt too.

Lachlan was advancing on Arran, swinging his fists more wildly and with a lot more force than he had done at first. Isla felt fear rising up within her at the thought of either of them getting hurt because they were arguing over her.

Arran hit out at him, but Lachlan used his own force against him and pushed him down to the ground. She saw the way that he hit his head and knew that it must have hurt. The sound of him groaning from the floor was quickly masked as he rose from the ground to lash out once more.

"Just leave it out, Lachlan," Arran grunted as he swung a harsh punch. "I dinnae want to fight with ye."

Lachlan staggered back after the punch to his jaw; blood trickled from his nose as he used a nearby tree to hold himself up. He snarled at Arran before shaking his head and running at him.

"I love her, and I will nae let ye take her from me!"

"It's nae like that!" Arran tried to defend himself, but Lachlan swung for him once more. Arran managed to easily dodge the blow before delivering one of his own. This time, Lachlan wasn't so quick to get back up.

He groaned on the floor, clutching his face while rolling over to face away from Arran.

“Ye will regret this,” Lachlan grunted.

“Lachlan,” Isla scolded him. “There is nay need for either of ye to fight like this, ye are being ridiculous.”

However, she could see the hurt in his eyes, and she knew that it was much more than just the physical pain from the punches. The hurt was evident, and it was a hurt that she had caused by not feeling the same way for him in return.

“Dinnae think that this will be the last time that ye will see me,” he said to Arran, spitting blood. Arran himself was looking rather pale, but it was clear that he’d won the fight. Isla noticed the swelling on his temple and knew that she would have to look at it soon. “I will be back for ye, and next time it will nae be a fair fight.”

“Lachlan, dinnae be like this! Ye are out of order for this.” Isla said as she watched him walk away. However, he shook his head and quickly stormed off back into the forest.

They waited a moment until he was out of sight before Isla rushed to Arran’s side, still unable to believe that she had just witnessed the two of them fighting.

“I didnae think that I would be able to punch like that,” Arran murmured as Isla tried to get a look at his head.

“How are ye feeling?” she asked, watching the way that his eyes appeared unable to focus.

“I feel strange,” he muttered. Isla noticed that he was leaning slightly onto her, but the weight was intensifying with each moment that passed.

“Arran?” she asked with a frown. “Arran?”

“I just... I’m just going to rest my...”

His eyes rolled back and he started to fall against her. She yelped

slightly while holding onto him, Luckily, Isla had anticipated this coming and held onto him as she lowered him down to the floor.

“Arran? Can ye hear me?” she continued to shake him slightly, but he had slipped out of consciousness.

His brown hair flopped over his brow, but he looked incredibly peaceful while sleeping. It reminded her of the days that he had spent asleep in the cottage before he had woken up to meet her properly. She held onto him as she sat on the dense forest floor, the moss soaked her dress, but she didn’t care.

She kept one hand on his neck, feeling for a pulse, as she listened to his heavy breathing. Isla knew that if she wanted to properly help him, she would need to get him back to the cottage. However, she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to do that without any help. The one person that she knew she could rely on for help had caused this, and so she had no choice but to wait for him to wake up while in the forest.



Arran rode along the outside of the forest. The tree line was on his right while the open moors stood on his left, but he preferred having at least some cover as he cut through the countryside on his way back to his clan’s castle. He needed to talk with his mother about his plans for the clan over the coming years now that he was in charge.

It had only been a short time since the death of his father, making him a Laird at a much younger age than he had anticipated. He rode with purpose, knowing that it was foolish of him now that he was a leader to be out unprotected.

However, he had wanted to get the fresh air and ride out to the borders of his land. He wanted to take it all in and appreciate it now that he was settling into the role. The wind was tousling his dark hair, keeping it out of his face as he rode into it, but he was still ready and poised if there was any sound of danger incoming.

His eyes were narrowed with concentration, but he didn’t notice the figure until the last minute as they rode behind him.

“Who’s there?” he called while trying to turn around and see who was

pursuing him. Arran could suddenly feel his heart pounding in his chest as he tried to outride the unknown figure wearing a dark hood. From their build, he was almost positive that it was a man, but that didn't narrow it down much for him.

He thought about the kind of target that he was now that he was the Laird, and he suddenly realized that the kind of person who would ride and remain anonymous was an assassin. Even just thinking the word caused him to urge his horse on much quicker than before.

"Reveal yerself!" His words were only met by another set of thundering hooves on the hard ground. The hooded man was getting closer to him, coming up on his left-hand side. Arran continued trying to get away from him, but he knew that he was going to have to do something to counter any attack.

His sword was sheathed at his waist, but he couldn't reach it while riding at such a speed without having to slow down.

"Stop now and I will have ye pardoned!" he shouted back to the hooded figure, who had yet to say anything. Before he could do anything else, the anonymous rider was at his side and reaching to push him from his horse. "Nay!"

Arran had no choice but to duck from the incoming blow of the man's sword, but he had no hope of regaining his balance as he veered to his right. He could feel himself slipping from the saddle as the hooded figure directed their attention to the straps of the saddle.

Without warning, he used his sword to cut at the straps until they were coming loose. There was nothing Arran could do as he tucked his limbs in and prepared for the impact of the ground. His horse continued on, as did the rider, but as soon as he made contact with the ground, everything went dark.



Arran gasped as he awoke quickly, flinching at the feeling of someone holding onto him. He darted away and turned around to see the familiar face of Isla staring back at him with wide and confused eyes.

"Are ye all right? Ye hit yer head and fell unconscious, are ye feeling all-"

"I remember!" he quickly cut her off, taking her hands in his.

"Ye... wait, what?" Isla was blinking quickly, her eyes searching his for any hint of jest. "Really?"

"I remember!" he cried once more while trying to sit up. Instead, he moved his hands up to cup Isla's face, pulling her closer to him. His mind was racing and he wasn't thinking, but in the moment, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss lasted only a few moments, although slightly longer than the last.

Arran enjoyed her lips on his, although Isla let out a sound of surprise at the sudden movement. She kissed him back still, and Arran couldn't help but laugh in delight as he finally pulled away.

"Ye have memories of who ye are and where ye come from?"

"Aye, I can remember who I am. Arran Woods of the McCann clan," he said quickly. The information both felt old and new all at once. It was a strange experience how things were just slotting back into the timeline within his mind. "I was attacked and thrown from my horse, I-I must have hit my head. That's when ye found me! Yes, it all makes sense now."

"And ye remember everything about yer past?" Isla asked carefully.

"Aye," he nodded, and realized that there was quite a big thing that he was going to have to tell her.

The countless training practices were coming back to him, as were the banquets, the feasts, the noblemen and women that he knew. The castle that was his home, he could remember every corridor and each hidden room. His sister and brother, his mother. He remembered the people in the world that he trusted the most and what he trusted them with. The names and faces rushed at him as though they were angry to have ever been forgotten.

"What is it?" Isla asked, snapping him back to reality. They were both still sitting on the damp forest floor, the dappled light from above casting hazy shadows against the moss and dead leaves.

"I... I remember who I was and what I did."

“Is it nae good?” she asked cautiously. Arran started to realize that she was probably assuming the worst, given his own reaction, and so he quickly shook his head.

“Nay, it’s good, very good actually. Although nae good for the life that we have here...” he said as his voice trailed off at the end. He saw the way that Isla’s face dropped upon hearing his last comment; he could see the dread filling in her eyes.

The walk back to the cottage was difficult since Arran was still a little dizzy, and Isla was trying to process what she'd just heard. He was a Laird. The Laird of the McCann clan.

Isla had thought that perhaps he was a nobleman because of what he'd worn, but she had never anticipated that he could have been the leader of an entire clan. She could feel the nausea in her gut beginning to rise up the more that she thought about the situation that now fell at her feet.

She knew that she would want him to stay if it was up to her. But it wasn't. Arran would need to go back to his people and become a ruler, someone that they could all look to as an example. She held onto his arm to give him some support as he struggled to walk still. He would need to rest that evening, and that would at least give them some time to properly work everything out.

"I can tell that ye are nae happy about this," he murmured as the cottage finally started to show in the distance.

"I'm happy that ye can remember who ye are," Isla quickly said back. She didn't want him to think that she was angry with him when she wasn't; she was angry at herself because she had known that this would happen, and yet she'd let herself get attached anyway.

"I have a whole clan waiting on my return," he said before biting his lip and staring out into the thick forest. "I cannae believe that. Isn't it so strange that one can just forget everything? I could have just been Arran the forager and I could have lived here with ye." He was chuckling as he spoke, but Isla still couldn't find it in herself to make light of the situation.

“What happened?” Elsie quickly rushed over to help her niece as soon as the two of them were in the door. She held his other arm as Isla closed the front door with the back of her foot, wincing upon seeing that the beds were all being used.

“Put him in my room,” Isla said as she started over towards her door. “Lachlan decided to fight Arran.”

“What! Why?” Elsie’s eyes were wide as her gaze darted between the two of them.

“He says he’s in love with me...” Isla said, her words trailing off. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to get into the details without revealing that she had kissed Arran. “They fought, and Arran hit his head again.”

“Honestly, I’m beginning to think that ye like getting hit in the head,” her aunt said, shaking her head.

“I did this time.” Arran nodded quickly. He was still smiling like an idiot, but Isla knew that it was just because he could remember who he was. “But it seemed to do the trick! I can remember everything!”

“That’s great news!” Elsie beamed at him. They slowly lowered him down onto Isla’s bed, and Isla was already anticipating her aunt’s reaction to the fact that Arran was a Laird.

“Ye will never guess who he is,” Isla said with a small smirk.

“I’m the Laird of the McCann clan,” Arran announced without giving Elsie much time to think.

“What?” Elsie asked with wide eyes, staggering back slightly. “Ye... ye are a Laird?”

“Aye,” Arran said with a chuckle. “I remember everything!”

“Oh, my,” Elsie was muttering to herself as she stood back from Arran and bowed her head to him.

“Dinnae be so silly, ye dinnae have to use the correct courtesies like that,” he said with a smile.

“All right, I’m sorry, my Laird,” Elsie said, straightening up. Isla felt slightly embarrassed that she hadn’t even thought about doing that for him when he’d told her. She had just assumed that they could go on as normal.

“Please, the formalities feel wrong in this setting,” Arran said, holding up a hand. He carried himself slightly differently to how he had done before he hit his head. Isla wasn’t sure what it was, but he was certainly more sure of himself now, which was a positive thing.

“I will get ye something to help ye sleep,” Elsie said before leaving the room and bowing her head. Isla couldn’t help but chuckle at the way that her aunt was acting; it was rather amusing to see that she was acting as though she had suddenly been placed into a castle and had to use all of the right formalities.

“I forget how many people act like that,” Arran chuckled and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I’ve lived in this cottage my whole life, I’ve never had to address a nobleman,” Isla said, feeling her cheeks heat up.

“Dinnae worry, I would nae want ye to feel that ye had to do that now,” Arran said, lying back. “This is a comfortable bed.”

“I’m sure that it is nothing compared to the one in yer castle,” Isla remarked, realizing that there was no way he would be able to stay with her for much longer.

“Nay, ye would be surprised actually but my bed in the castle is actually rather hard. The physician says that it is better for me, but I dinnae think that’s true,” Arran said as he stared up at her.

He sounded as though he was going through all of the facts that were coming up to the top of his mind. He was trying to process everything, and Isla could tell that he was going to be saying random things that were going to come to his mind.

Isla stayed with him for the day, watching over him as he slept and making sure that he was all right.

“That’s quite a surprise,” Elsie remarked when Isla finally stepped out into the main room of the cottage. “I cannae believe that he’s a Laird,

an actual Laird!”

“Ye can stop saying that now,” Isla chuckled as she joined her aunt. “He’s sleeping peacefully, but I’ll go and check on him in a little while.”

She could feel her aunt’s gaze on her as she sat down and reclined in the chair.

“How do ye feel about what happened today?”

“I dinnae ken what to think,” Isla muttered. “Lachlan has always been my friend, but I never thought that he would do something like that and take it so far.”

“It was quite a shock to hear that they had been fighting out there,” Elsie nodded. “Although, I’m nae surprised. I could tell that Lachlan felt that way about ye.”

“Why did ye nae tell me?” Isla asked as she looked at her aunt in surprise.

“Because it was nae my place to tell ye. It was Lachlan’s. He’s had years to tell ye, and sometimes, ye are just too late,” Elsie said, folding her arms over her chest. “I think that he should have told ye a long time ago, that way, ye could have avoided a situation like today.”

“Do ye think he will talk to me again?” Isla asked. She couldn’t imagine how he would be in the future now that he had fought Arran.

“I dinnae ken, that’s for him to decide,” her aunt said. “I hope that he sees how he did things wrong and will at least apologize to ye.”

Isla was silent for a while as she thought about how different her life would have been if Lachlan had told her about his feelings a long time ago. She would have probably accepted them since she had never really known anyone else. There might have been a time when she could have loved him, but that was not the time that they were in. Isla’s heart was currently entwined with another’s, and there was simply nothing that she could do about it.

“What do ye think about the young Laird now, then?” Elsie’s curiosity

broke through the silence that had settled around them.

“I think that he’s going to have to go back to his clan and rule them as he did before he was knocked from his horse,” she said in a small voice. It was a hard enough truth to have to think about, let alone to actually say out loud. She winced at the way that it had tasted on her tongue, knowing that she was going to have to say goodbye to him and go back to her daily life.

“Would ye want to go with him?” her aunt asked.

“I dinnae ken,” Isla said. “I would nae fit in where he comes from; that is nae my world. I dinnae even ken if he wants me to be part of that, he may nae want me to come with him.”

“I dinnae think that he would have fought for ye if he did nae want ye in his life for a long time,” her aunt chuckled.

“He is very kind-hearted. I’ve only heard stories of Lairds who are old and greedy. That does nae seem like him at all.”

“Aye, he certainly has a good heart in him,” Elsie agreed. “I think that he has been given the title much earlier than he had been planning to receive it.”

The thought stirred something within her. He’d lost a parent; he must have lost his father if he was a young Laird. It was a similarity between them that she hadn’t thought about before. She had lost both of her parents, although Isla wanted to believe that they were still out there somewhere. She refused to accept that they were gone forever; it would break her if she found evidence that they were.

Later in the evening, Isla decided to retire to her room, tired of thinking about what the day had brought her. She noticed that her aunt was being very careful around her, as though she were an irritable creature that would snap at the slightest thing. After saying goodnight to her aunt, she slipped into her bedroom and arranged some blankets and cushions on the floor by her bed.

Arran had been asleep for quite a few hours, and so she sat by him for a while, checking that he wasn’t too hot and that his breathing was regular. He started to stir just as Isla yawned and decided that she would sleep.

“Isla?”

“I’m here.” She smiled as he stared up at her. His eyes widened for a moment before returning to their normal size.

“Ye are so beautiful,” he whispered as he took her hand in his.

“How are ye feeling now?” she asked, trying to dodge his compliment. She could feel his gaze burning into her as she blushed.

“I’m feeling better,” he nodded, sitting up.

“That’s good,” she smiled, noticing the way that he was staring at her lips once more.

“I’m in yer bed, aren’t I?” He broke her gaze to look around.

“Aye,” she said. “The other beds were taken by patients when we arrived.”

“Here, I will let ye rest,” he said, trying to move.

“No, please, stay put,” Isla said as she quickly placed a hand to his chest.

They both paused and stared at her hand on his bare chest. He’d taken off his cotton shirt so that he could sleep more comfortably, and Isla could feel the heat of his body radiating through her palm.

“I need to tell ye something,” he said as he moved slightly closer to her. Isla couldn’t take her eyes off of him as he moved toward her, his toned body exposed as the sheet fell from the rest of his chest and torso.

“What is it?”

“I ken that I have nae been here very long, that I’ve nae had my memories, and I suppose ye could say that I have nae fully been who I normally am. But I ken that I have been true to myself about one thing, and that is my feelings for ye.” Isla felt her heart flutter at his comments. “I want to tell ye that I am falling for ye in a way that I have never done with anyone else before. I have nae felt so strongly

for a woman before, and while it does terrify me, it is also very exciting to think that I ken ye have similar feelings for me.”

She smiled at him as his lips started to twitch up too.

“I’m falling for ye, Arran,” she whispered, realizing that her lips were only slightly apart from his. “I feel so strongly for ye, and I’m sorry about Lachlan today. I did nae ken that he would-”

Arran placed a finger to her lips, silencing her as he shook his head.

“I dinnae want to talk about him, and what he did is nae yer fault so ye have nay need to apologize,” he said in a reassuring tone.

“I wish that I could have been of more help,” she said as her shoulders sagged.

“It happened for a reason, and I’m glad that it did, since I can now remember everything again,” Arran said with a slight chuckle. “It’s a blessing, think of it that way.”

She smiled at him, letting her forehead rest against his as Arran placed one of his hands on her cheek. Without saying anything more, his lips were upon hers again. Isla kissed back, the smile on her face only intensifying as she moved further into his arms. Her bed wasn’t too large, but that only meant that they had no choice but to remain close together.

She could feel his other hand running up and down her back, causing her to shudder whenever his fingers would meet the bare skin at the top of her neck.

“I want to be with ye, Isla,” he whispered against her. “I want to spend a lot of time with ye from now on.”

She could feel her heart fluttering and her insides churning at the thought of being the woman beside a Laird. She had never thought when she had developed feelings for him that he would feel a similar way; he was such a handsome man, and she had been positive that someone like him would have had someone waiting for his return.

“Are ye sure that ye want that?” she asked, her cheeks flushed.

“What do ye mean?” he frowned and sat back.

“Well, ye are a Laird and-”

“I dinnae want to hear talk about that,” he said while shaking his head quickly. “I am a Laird, and that means that I can court who I want.”

The word “court” was one that Isla wasn’t too familiar with. It wasn’t part of her life in the forest, but she assumed that it was something to do with being his person.

His lips pressed to hers once more, and Isla felt a lot of her unease leave her.

“I want to show ye how much I really care about ye,” he murmured against her lips. At first, Isla didn’t understand what he meant, but she could feel both of his hands against her back, toying with the string of her dress.

He was kissing down her jaw and neck, eliciting shudders through Isla. She bit her lip before sighing at the sensation of him being everywhere. She had never been touched in such a way by a man before, but it felt incredible to have him so intimately caressing her body.

She held onto his shoulders, seeking out his face as he kissed her once more. Her lips were slightly swollen as he started to move his hips against hers. The friction created the kind of sparks that she had never felt before; they rippled through her and caused her to bury her face in the crook of his neck to stop her sounds from being too loud. The last thing that she wanted was for her aunt to hear her.

His fingers started to push at the material of her dress with a little more force until the material was moving down her body and slipping off her shoulders. Isla’s first instinct was to cover up her chest with her arms, but Arran quickly shook his head as he smiled lightly at her.

“Ye dinnae need to cover up for me, Isla,” he whispered as he kissed her shoulder tenderly. “I think that ye are beautiful, all of yer body is beautiful.”

She had never been showered with compliments in such a way before as she stared at him in awe, slowly lowering her arms to reveal

herself. His lips dipped lower as Isla let her head rest back; her breathing was heavy and her skin flushed. Before he could go any further, she felt Arran pulling the covers back from himself, revealing the breeches that he wore. He quickly held onto her before flipping her over so that he was now the one on top.

“There we go,” he smiled down at her. “I like seeing ye like this.”

Isla stared up at him, her eyes slightly hooded as she felt a need for him that she couldn’t describe. His fingers trailed down her body, causing her to shudder as she glanced down at the direction they were moving in.

Her back arched and she let her hands grip the sheets as she felt his fingers dip below the hem of her skirt, slowly inching closer to her core. Isla watched the small smirk on his face as he tugged at the remaining material until she was completely exposed. The fresh air against her skin caused her to shiver as she let her legs close on instinct, however, Arran was shaking his head once again.

“Is this all right?” he asked as he let his face dip down to hers.

“Aye,” she said breathlessly, feeling the presence of his fingers return. They ghosted over her most sensitive spot, causing her hips to rise up to meet them as quickly as they could.

“I want to show ye what I can do for ye,” he whispered as he started to kiss down the valley of her breasts. She watched in awe as he paved a path with his kisses all the way down to her core, Isla’s eyes widened as she realized what he was going to do. She couldn’t believe that he was about to taste her there; she had never heard of such a thing.

She was just about to sit up and protest that perhaps it wasn’t right, but he was suddenly sucking on her sensitive bundle of nerves. Isla placed her own hand to her mouth to stop the loud sounds that were coming from her lips. Her toes curled and she held onto his hair with her other hand.

“Oh god.” She breathed through the motions, feeling her body shudder. Her hips were bucking and she was trying to get more. She could see through her eyelashes that he was smirking against her, knowing exactly how good she was feeling at that moment.

“How does that feel?” he whispered against her. His soft eyes found hers, and Isla felt like melting against his touch.

“S-so good,” Isla stammered as she let her head rest back against her pillow. She felt as though someone had ignited a fire within her lower stomach, it felt so good and yet she was also feeling as though she could explode at any moment.

She’d never felt such a thing before; her body was quivering against his touch and she didn’t feel that there was anything she could do to stop it.

“Oh,” she moaned out, letting her back arch once more. Arran was continuing with his tongue, slowly adding his fingers to the mix as he started to move them a lot faster. Isla was a squirming mess under him, and she couldn’t believe that he could make her feel good.

She had always thought that pleasure was for the man, but she had never let anyone make her feel so good before. She wasn’t sure what it was, or even how to describe it, but the pleasure was suddenly intensifying as he curled his fingers.

She yelped slightly at the intense feeling, gripping Arran’s hair harder as she felt as though something had been released from her. Her body relaxed and shook as the intense feeling ran through her like a river that wouldn’t stop.

“Arran,” she whispered as she shuddered and started to regain control of her body.

“How was that?” he asked with a smirk as he moved back up her body. Isla no longer felt conscious that she was completely exposed to him; she was just feeling content at the way that he had made her feel.

“Incredible,” she breathed out, her hair sticking to her brow as she tried - but failed - to control her breathing. “That was incredible.”

“I’m glad that ye enjoyed it,” Arran chuckled as he pressed his lips to hers. Isla could taste herself on his lips and blushed, but she continued to hold onto him, not wanting to let him go.

“Did ye want...”

“Nae tonight,” he chuckled and shook his head. “I just want to stay here with ye like this.”

That night, Isla slept happily and with someone next to her for the first time. She had never felt so content before and couldn't believe that this had all happened because she'd found a man in the stream and saved him.

Isla awoke the next morning with the breeze of the open window lapping at her bare skin. A smile was on her face as she turned over in the covers, but the bed beside her was empty.

Her eyes fluttered open slowly as she felt around in the covers for the man that had brought her so much happiness since he'd come into her life. At first, she couldn't believe what had happened the night before, yet for a moment, she started to wonder if it had all been a dream.

But voices from the main room of the cottage alerted her to the fact that Arran was still there, and he had been the one who had made the night so special. She held the cover up to her chest, holding it for a moment as she thought about what the two of them had done. She blushed to think that he had already seen all of her, and yet she was yet to see all of him. Isla hoped that he hadn't just wanted that of her, for surely he would have done more to give himself pleasure if that had been the case.

She was still a flower, and the idea of giving a man her delicate petals was a difficult one. She wasn't sure if she could trust that he wouldn't crush them with his bare hands. After thinking about the night for a while, Isla knew that it was time to get up and start her day, or her aunt would start to make comments about how lazy she was here.

"Well, well," her aunt's voice spoke up as Isla left her bedroom. She couldn't help the smile on her face as she stared between her aunt and Arran. She hadn't woken up feeling so content for a very long time, and to see his eyes on her once more caused Isla's cheeks to flush.

She had no choice but to look away from him and instead focused on her aunt as she sat down at the table.

“Ye are nae always so late to rise,” Elsie remarked as Isla decided to keep her gaze on the table. The smell of lavender wafted through the room due to the purple plants that were receiving sunlight on the window sill. The breeze pushed the pleasant scent toward Isla, mingling with the mixture of warm bread and other herbs within the kitchen.

“I was just tired.” Isla shrugged off her aunt’s comment. “I was helping Arran to regain his strength last night.”

“Aye, I’m sure.”

She caught the strange tone in Elsie’s voice as her eyes locked with Arran’s. Isla could feel her cheeks continuing to heat up as he smiled at her. She had helped him, but he had also shown her pleasure in a way that she hadn’t even known was possible.

“Well, I dinnae have time to be dealing with idle hands. I need ye to get on with yer jobs because I already have a few patients to tend to.”

Isla nodded slowly in response to her aunt’s request, although, she felt as though it was a real difficulty to drag her gaze away from Arran’s.

“I will go and gather some wood,” Arran announced as he rose from the table.

“I dinnae think that it’s a good idea for ye to be doing anything of the sort,” Elsie fired back. “Ye suffered another head injury, and while it has helped ye regain yer memories, it’s now the physical damage that I’m worried about.”

“I will be fine. I will only go just out of the cottage and I will nae wander too far,” he said with a shrug.

Elsie was clearly not happy about it, but Isla could sense that her aunt was still a little hesitant around him after finding out that he was a Laird. Without saying another word, Arran rose and crossed the room, heading for the door that would lead him out of the small house.

Soon it was just the two of them left, and Isla continued to sit at the table while letting her hands rest in her lap. Part of her was wondering whether her aunt had heard them the night before, it would have been a rather embarrassing conversation, one that Isla

wanted to avoid.

Just as she started to rise from the table, her aunt decided to speak up. "Do ye plan on going to see Lachlan?"

Isla thought about this for a moment; a large part of her was terrified about going to see him after the violent outburst he'd had the day before, but he was still her closest friend.

"I dinnae ken," she said, running a hand through her knotted brown hair. "I'm still angry at him for what he did, and I dinnae want him to think that he can treat Arran like that and get away with it."

"Aye, I think that there will have to be some difficult conversations ahead for both of ye... that's if ye do choose to speak to him," Elsie said.

"I cannae speak with him today. I feel that it is too soon."

The anger that she felt toward Lachlan was still very raw, and not something that she wanted to talk about. Isla wanted to at least calm down and try to find a way to process what had happened before she decided to speak with him. She was in half a mind - the angriest half - to shout back in the way that he'd spoken to them both the day before, but Isla knew that it would get her nowhere.

"I want to hope that the two of ye will make up, but I must say that this is out of character for him."

"Aye," Isla said in response to her aunt. "This is nae the Lachlan that I have spent so many years with."

As Isla thought about the confession that Lachlan had made, she realized the impact that it was going to have on their friendship going forward. He had told her his feelings, but Isla couldn't feel the same way about him.

She wished that things were easier for them, that she could just feel the same deep feelings for Lachlan as he did for her, but that would mean ignoring the feelings that were flourishing for Arran. Just as her aunt had said, Lachlan had years to tell her, but he'd been too late.

“Did ye really ken that he has loved me this entire time?” Isla asked, turning to look at her aunt.

“I thought that ye would have caught on by now,” Elsie admitted with a slight chuckle. “He has loved ye for a long time; he never told me, but ye could see it in his eyes.”

Isla tried to cast her mind back to think of the times that she’d caught her friend staring at her; with the knowledge that she now had, she knew that there was no mistaking the way that Lachlan had looked at her.

“But he is not where my feelings lie,” Isla said slowly. Her aunt nodded in response, pursing her lips.

“Aye, and ye must follow yer heart, Isla. Dinnae do what ye think will please others, because that is nae how ye will find happiness in this life.”

Isla often enjoyed it when her aunt would give her good advice, however, the thought of breaking Lachlan’s heart didn’t sit well with her.

“Thank ye.” She nodded to her aunt and quickly decided to make herself busy. “I will speak with Arran today, but I am nae going to go and see Lachlan.”

“Ye do what ye think is the right thing,” her aunt said.

Isla wasn’t sure that she was doing the right thing. She wanted to believe that she was following the path that was made for her, but she couldn’t be sure. Arran was a Laird after all, and that meant that he was going to have to go back to his people sooner or later. Isla wasn’t sure that there would be a space for her in that life, as it would be very different from her life in the cottage.

Isla quickly followed Arran’s previous steps out of the house and towards the area of the forest where he was gathering wood to keep the fire burning in the cottage.

“Good morning,” he said as his eyes lit up. Isla smiled and let her arms cross over her chest.

“How is yer head feeling?” Isla asked, approaching him.

“It aches a wee bit, but it is nothing compared to the first injury,” Arran said with a chuckle. “How are ye feeling?”

Isla paused for a moment, unable to stop the way that her lips curved up into a knowing smile.

“I’m very happy,” she admitted, laughing.

“Good, I’m glad to hear.” Arran’s smile was warm. It reminded Isla of the same sensation when the sun would break through the leaves, dappling her with reassuring warmth. “I will have to stay here for another short while until yer aunt has deemed me as fully recovered. I hope that will be all right?”

Isla tried to stop her face from lighting up at his question, but she was incredibly pleased to learn that she would at least have him around for a little while longer. He was a Laird, and somewhere out there, there was some land that belonged to him. Somewhere out there, some people turned to him for guidance and leadership.

Isla knew that it was selfish of her to want to keep such an important person all to herself in the forest, but she didn’t know what else to do.

“I’m sure that we can make some arrangements,” Isla nodded, unable to ebb the smile on her face.

“I promise that I will pull my weight around here and help out with the various tasks,” Arran continued, gesturing to the small pile of wood that he was starting to pull together. “I can even give yer aunt some money for the trouble?”

Isla was slightly shocked by the offer; she had forgotten that if he was a Laird, it meant that he would have money to throw around however he wanted. It was such an obvious fact, but money meant nothing in the forest; as long as they could afford to eat, there was no other need for it.

“That is very kind and generous of ye, but I think it should be fine,” she chuckled.

“All right,” Arran nodded.

The smile on his face was the same kind of smile that he’d flashed her while in her bed the night before. Isla thought about how he had looked up at her in between kissing parts of her exposed body. She was yearning for him all over again, knowing now what could happen between them and how he could make her feel.

“What are ye thinking about?” he asked with a slight smirk.

“What? Nothing.” Isla quickly shook her head.

“Ye are blushing though,” he said, taking another step forward. Isla could feel herself becoming flustered by his intense gaze, but she wasn’t sure what to do about it. She bit her lip and quickly stared down at the floor as Arran continued to step closer to her.

“It’s just... warm out here,” she said, cursing how small her voice sounded.

“Ye are nae a good liar,” Arran chuckled.

Isla could feel her body relaxing only when his hands came to rest on her waist. Her skin tingled and she denied herself the urge to shudder. She smiled up at him, wanting to change the subject since all she could think about was him in front of her.

“I... I’m supposed to go deeper into the forest than usual today,” she stammered. “I ken an area where hemlock grows, and my aunt needs it.”

“I shall escort ye?” Arran asked, although his face was lowering down to her height.

“Aye,” Isla was barely able to breathe the word out.

His lips pressed to hers in a way that was so gentle, the pressure felt as though it was barely there. However, Arran quickly used his hands to pull her even closer to him, until Isla was pressed against his cotton shirt.

Her eyes closed in an instant, and she kissed him back as her arms

moved to be around the back of his neck. She was slightly cautious of kissing out in the open like that, remembering the last time it had happened and how angry Lachlan had been. But Isla quickly pushed the thought to the back of her mind and enjoyed the fiery sensation of his lips against hers.

Finally, they broke apart, staring into one another's eyes as though they were getting lost in the gaze. She smiled at him, amazed by how happy one person could make her feel.

"So, shall we start making our way to this hemlock ye speak of?" he asked, clearly trying the word out for the first time.

"Aye, it's just this way," Isla said, taking his hand and gesturing down one of the paths that led away from the cottage.

Isla and Arran wandered through the thick clusters of trees with wide smiles on their faces. She had never felt so content about something before, even if it had brought her a lot of trouble.

“Are ye going to speak to Lachlan soon?” Arran spoke up. The only other sound was that of the tree leaves rustling above in the light, morning breeze.

“I dinnae ken,” Isla admitted. “I’m still so angry at him with how he dealt with everything. It doesnae feel like he was in his right mind, but I dinnae understand why he felt the need to act like that.”

“He’s in love with ye,” Arran said with a slight shrug, his gaze finding hers for a moment.

“Aye, and I dinnae love him back,” she said in a much more casual tone than she had intended. “I love that he has always been my friend and that he has always been there for me, but I dinnae love him in the way that he does me.”

Isla knew that her words held such a large impact that it felt almost strange to just be saying them so casually out loud. However, she didn’t want to lie to herself, or to Arran. She wanted to show him how she really felt and where her true feelings were.

“I ken exactly why he acted in such a way, I think that deep down, he must ken that’s how ye feel too.”

Isla thought about this for a moment; she’d known Lachlan for years, and it was entirely true that he could have witnessed the fact that she only saw him as a friend on many occasions.

"I suppose ye are right," Isla nodded. "I just wish that he had nae been so angered."

"Ye are his love," Arran reasoned. "If I was in love with a woman and she did nae love me back, I suppose that I too would be rather upset."

Her mind instantly jumped to the fact that he would soon be leaving their life at the cottage. He would have to resume his duties as a Laird, and one of those was making sure that he had an heir to all that was his. She had already thought about the idea of him going; it was one that she kept pushing to the back of her mind. But it was something that would eventually demand to be talked about.

They continued down the path that Isla rarely took through the forest. The paths had been created through years of walking the same routes, but this one was so infrequently used that the bushes and plants around it were constantly creeping back to reclaim it as theirs. Isla found herself having to tread on stems and twigs to make it a more manageable route, but it was proving difficult.

"It's nae much further," she called back to Arran. "It's the largest amount of hemlock that I've found growing in these woods."

"What does it do?" Arran asked with a frown.

"It's a healing plant that my aunt uses to make a poultice," Isla explained. "It has a lot of uses but mainly used when people come in that have a chest problem of some sorts, especially in the winter when a lot of people have bad coughs."

"Ye have such an impressive knowledge about such things," Arran said with a slight chuckle. However, as Isla turned to look up at him, she noticed the adoring smile on his face as he spoke.

"Thank ye. I suppose that it's all I've ever known while living out here with my aunt," she said.

"I've never met women with such good knowledge about the natural world," Arran continued. "Even some men I ken at the castle dinnae ken such things."

Castle. The word stuck out to Isla like a jarring difference. They were from such different lives that she had almost forgotten he would live

in a large castle with servants to do everything for him.

“Do ye remember everything?” Isla already knew the answer to her question, but she wanted to be sure.

“Aye.” He nodded. “I remember the sudden death of my father a few years ago, and my mother. I remember my two younger siblings and my allies who are other Lairds. I remember all of the rules and etiquettes that I was always taught to follow, and it all just came back to me as soon as Lachlan struck me. If my mother could see me now, dressed in such plain attire, I think she may faint,” he chuckled.

But Isla was finding it difficult to laugh as he started to recall his other life, the one that seemed to be waiting for him rather patiently for the time being. However, she wondered when that patience would expire, and people would venture into the forests to find him.

“I’m sorry that I’m nae more enthusiastic about this,” she admitted upon seeing the way that his smile faded slowly.

“Nay, I understand.” Arran brushed it off. “I suppose that ye only had some slight experience of that world as a child?”

“Aye, and then as soon as my parents disappeared, I was brought to my aunt.” Isla nodded. “But I dinnae remember much about that life; this has always been worth focusing on rather than distant memories... ah! Hemlock.”

Isla rushed over to the white flowers and quickly started to carefully examine which bunch would suffice. The contrast of the white against the green stems always seemed to make them look so elegant to Isla. She started to pick the plants and quickly placed them into the bag hanging off one of her shoulders.

“When I first awoke, I remember thinking what a simple life it is that the two of ye live in this forest,” Arran remarked from behind her. “But the more that I’ve been experiencing this life with both ye and yer aunt, the more I’m realizing that it is all much more complicated than I had first thought.”

“Aye, there are a lot of plants to learn, a lot of names, and a lot of properties to remember,” Isla nodded, turning to look at him. “Like hemlock; it has a lot of great healing properties, but it’s also very

poisonous if used incorrectly.”

Isla watched as Arran retracted his hand from where he was about to touch some.

“How poisonous?”

“It would kill ye,” Isla said in a rather nonchalant tone. It was simply a fact that she had grown up with, and not one that she had even given too much thought to anymore. Her aunt knew how to extract the correct materials from the seeds and leaves that meant it could be used for the right reasons.

“Wow,” Arran breathed out. “I had nae even thought about that. I just assumed that ye were gathering safe plants.”

Isla shrugged it off, but she was slightly surprised by how impressed he was by what she was telling him. As a Laird, she hadn’t thought that there would be much she would be able to do that would impress him since she had spent most of her time being incredibly impressed since his revelation.

“I think I’ve just felt a new-found respect for the healers in the castle,” Arran said with a chuckle. “I would love for ye to meet with them. I’m sure that ye and yer aunt would be able to share invaluable knowledge.”

“Ye want me to come to yer castle?” Isla blinked as she asked the question, unable to believe what he was telling her.

“Aye, of course, I do,” Arran said, chuckling as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “What did I tell ye last night?”

She thought back to the soft words that had been spoken under the light of a singular candle; he’d told her how his feelings for her had grown over the last couple of weeks. Isla had thought that perhaps he was still reeling from the head injury.

“I just... I cannae believe it,” she said with a slight chuckle. “I’ve been on my own with my aunt for so long, and then all of a sudden two men decide that they feel so strongly for me.”

"I should nae be so surprised if I was as beautiful as ye," Arran responded, eliciting a fresh hue of pink from Isla's flushed cheeks.

"Ye are too kind, my Laird," Isla said in jest. She couldn't believe that someone like him was so infatuated with her.

"I told ye that ye dinnae have to call me by my title," Arran said. "I am just Arran."

Isla smiled as she responded. "All right, Arran, ye are very kind to me."

"Well, ye and yer aunt have shown me nothing but kindness in return," he said.

Isla could feel his gaze on her as she continued to pull up some roots of hemlock, making sure to be careful not to take too many. She worked quickly and meticulously so that they would be able to return to the cottage before her aunt grew suspicious of why they were taking so long. However, she was sure that Elsie had already figured out that there was something going on, something that stretched over into being slightly more than kindness.

"Have ye ever thought about leaving the forest?" Arran asked as they started back up the path that they had come from.

"I sometimes have to leave to travel to the nearest town when we need supplies, but this is all I've ever known other than that. I have nae ever had a reason to leave before," Isla said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Aye, I can see that yer life here is very peaceful," Arran said, but his words sounded slightly labored. She kept thinking about what he'd said while she was gathering up the plants; he wanted her to come to the castle, but he hadn't said for how long. She was still in half a mind that perhaps he was only offering out of politeness and in an attempt to repay the debt he felt he had to them.

Isla wouldn't ask for anything from him in return. It had been an incredibly simple decision to make to help him when she'd first found him. Isla hadn't done it for any reward.

"I shall leave ye now and return to gathering wood for Elsie," Arran

said as they stood outside of the cottage.

“Aye, I should get these roots to her quickly,” she nodded before leaving him outside. Even though they were only going to be apart for a few hours, Isla still felt a pain in her chest where she missed him.

“Ah, there ye are,” her aunt’s voice brought her back to the present and helped to banish thoughts of missing Arran. “Did ye get the hemlock?”

“Aye,” Isla muttered as she noticed the other woman in the room with them. Her name was Sara, and she was one of Elsie’s friends from the nearest village.

“And the dulse?” Elsie asked while taking a peek into the bag that Isla was handing her. She felt her heart drop at her aunt’s words and quickly paused her movements.

“I’m sorry, I completely forgot to pick some...”

Isla didn’t have an excuse; she had been talking with Arran and - as though under a spell - had almost completely forgotten everything else that she was supposed to do.

“Isla,” her aunt sighed and shook her head.

“Be soft on her, Elsie,” Sara said with a light chuckle. “I can see it in yer eyes, girl,” the much larger woman said. “Ye are in love, aye? The man outside has got yer heart in his hand, aye?”

Isla felt frozen to the spot as she saw Arran from one of the windows continuing to gather wood. She realized that Sara must have seen the two of them coming up the path.

Sara was a rather stout woman, but she had kind eyes. She was someone who accepted how different her aunt was and didn’t judge her for it, but Isla had almost forgotten just how quick she was at working things out.

She was still unsure of how to answer the woman in their kitchen, and Isla could feel her aunt’s inquisitive gaze on her.

“I... well, I don’t...”

“It’s all right, my dear, we have all experienced such a thing,” Sara chuckled. “But try nae to lose yer head.”

Isla nodded slowly while pressing her lips into a tight line, not trusting her stammering voice anymore. “He has been very kind to me over the last few weeks, and we have grown affectionate toward one another.”

She was speaking more toward her aunt as though she had to justify her actions, but Elsie merely nodded.

“Aye, I’m nae blind, Isla,” her aunt said, and both of the women laughed. “I can see exactly what is blooming, especially after the outburst from Lachlan.”

“What happened with Lachlan?”

Elsie quickly told a summary of the story to Sara so that she was in understanding of the entire situation.

“Ah, it makes sense; ye have beautifully big, brown eyes,” Sara said. “I have nay doubt that there will be more than one man who is vying to have yer hand.”

Isla blushed at the compliment, unsure what to say as she averted her gaze and looked out of the window. However, her eyes met with Arran’s from across the small yard to the side of the cottage, and Isla found herself even more flustered than before.

“I’m going to my room,” Isla muttered as she quickly crossed the room, ignoring the muted chuckles coming from both Sara and Elsie.

That evening, a knock on her bedroom door startled her. Isla pushed away a stray strand of dark hair from her face and stared up at the door. She had been sure that it would be her aunt, wanting to speak more about what her friend had pointed out before, but to her surprise, Arran was standing in the half-light of a few candles.

Isla was yet to have any supper, but she was still feeling rather embarrassed about what had happened before. She didn't know what to say as he stood in her doorway, stepping forward so that he could close the wooden door behind him.

"But what about-"

"She's gone out," Arran said, holding his hand up. "I dinnae ken how long for, but I just wanted to steal a moment with ye."

Isla stood in front of him, staring up at his muscular chest and shoulders. She wanted to make the singular move forward that would press her body into his, but she felt frozen under his gaze.

"I dinnae ken how ye manage it," Arran said, tearing his eyes away from hers finally. "But ye just always look so beautiful. Even when the sun is gone, and ye are barely illuminated, I can still see yer radiance."

She felt his hand trail down her arm, causing her to shudder and her breath to catch in her throat. Arran took another step forward, closing the gap and lowering his head; however, he made no further movement to attach his lips to hers.

"I meant everything I said last night; I want to be with ye, and I want

to make ye happy.” Arran spoke in a low voice. “I want to be the one to make ye feel good, just like last night.”

Isla felt the heat returning to her body as flashes of memories arose in her mind. She thought about the way he’d made her feel, how good it had felt, and how surprising it had been to feel so good. Isla hadn’t thought that to even be possible.

“I want ye so badly,” he continued. “But it’s more than that, I want to be with ye in more than just that physical way.”

“What are ye saying?” Isla asked with a frown, feeling his breath fanning over her face. They were so close that her lips were almost touching his.

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“Come with me back to my castle, back to my home,” Arran said. “I want ye to be with me. I’ve never felt such a connection like this to anyone before, and I want ye to be part of my life.”

Isla felt as though her head was spinning. He had started to talk about it in the woods, but the conversation had felt very casual; now it was feeling far too intense.

“But this is my home,” she said without really thinking. “And...and in a castle, I’m nae...I dinnae have any kind of status...and ye are a Laird and-”

Arran cut off her words by pressing his lips to hers. Isla was slightly surprised by the suddenness of his actions, but her body was instantly ready to kiss back and simply melted into his touch. She felt as though she could be with him forever during those moments; whenever their lips touched it felt like a stone striking flint. For a moment, she forgot about the worries that ran through her about going to his clan and his castle.

“Ye should nae worry about such things,” Arran murmured while kissing down her jaw. Isla felt glad that one of his arms remained around her waist, for her knees felt too weak to fully hold her up.

“But what will people say if ye are with a forest girl? I am hardly the kind of woman that should be associated with a Laird,” Isla continued. The fog had cleared from her mind slightly as he continued to kiss down her neck, but she couldn’t help the breathy moan that escaped her lips as he sucked on a particularly sensitive spot.

“I just want to be with ye,” he groaned against her skin. “I dinnae care for status or these things ye speak of. I’m a Laird, and that means that I can be with any kind of woman. I want to be with ye.”

“I want to be with ye too, I’m just scared of what yer people will say,” she admitted.

“They will see ye, and they will be enraptured by yer beauty and knowledge, just like I am. They will nae be able to say anything about someone with such a kind soul,” Arran said while moving up to face her once more.

“What of my aunt?”

“She can come too,” Arran said with a shrug. He was like a child, one who wasn’t thinking of the wider implications of his decisions and the various logistics involved.

“She has her patients here that need to be attended to,” Isla said with a chuckle.

Before responding, Arran moved his arms down below her waist, scooping her up until she found herself on her bed. Isla let out a slight squeak of surprise at the sudden movement, laughing as she lay on her back and looked up at him. She had to shake her head to push the flailing strands of her long hair out of her face.

“Then she can come and visit us, and we will come and visit her,” Arran said in response to her concerns. Isla couldn’t help but laugh at his words; he was very good at making everything seem so simple.

“Let me think about it,” Isla murmured against his lips. Arran kissed back with a lot more intensity, his hands started to wander lower over her body, scrambling her thoughts once more. Isla could feel her lower region beginning to throb in anticipation as a hardness pressed against her thigh. Her throat was tightening as his eyes darkened. She wanted nothing more than to share the evening with him, but the risk

of her aunt coming home was still very present.

His hips moved down against exactly where she needed him the most, causing Isla's eyes to roll back and her back to arch slightly, but she wanted more.

His hair had flopped in front of his eyes a little, and she could see that there was a concentration in his face that hadn't been there before.

"I want ye so bad," Isla found herself saying as she felt his movements hesitating.

"Aye, but we cannae tonight," he whispered.

As though her aunt had been waiting for the perfect time, they both jolted at the sound of the door to the cottage opening from the other room. Isla quickly scrambled off the bed, moving Arran back by placing her hands against his strong chest. She knew that it would be rather obvious to her aunt to see the two of them coming out of her room while she'd been gone, but she hoped it was at least better than Elsie catching them on the bed.

"I'm home," she called out.

"Just in my room," Isla called back, wincing at the way her voice wobbled. She felt breathless; too much had happened at once and she was trying her hardest to act normal.

She quickly sat down on her bed, smoothing out her hair and then the material of her skirt as Arran perched on the other side of the bed. He quickly ran a hand through his own hair and rolled back his shoulders.

"Is everything all right in here?" Elsie asked, coming to the door and looking inside.

"Aye," Isla said, plastering a wide smile onto her face. "Everything is fine, I was just... we were just..."

"Isla was teaching me about the different plants that she gathered today," Arran said as Isla coughed as though to excuse why she had stopped talking.

“Oh.” Elsie’s face lit up as she opened the door a little wider. “What did she teach ye?” Isla wished that he’d said something else, anything else that would have invited no more questions.

“Uh, well it was mainly about the hemlock that we went out to get earlier,” Arran continued. His face remained unbothered by the challenge that had been put onto him, and Isla couldn’t believe that he was doing so well under pressure. “I could nae believe how poisonous it is if it isn’t handled right!”

Isla felt herself drift away from the conversation as she stared at the chiseled features of the man on the other side of her bed. She was still finding it incredible that someone like him could like her so much. Her heart fluttered whenever his eyes found hers, and she had to stop herself from thinking that they were the only two people in the world.

Suddenly, she realized that both of them were turning to look at her. Her aunt had a slight frown on her face as she stared at her niece, and Isla blinked a few times before shrugging.

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening properly, what were ye saying?”

“I was just saying that it’s getting late and ye havenae eaten anything yet,” Elsie remarked as though pleased with herself for noticing such a thing. Motherhood wasn’t something that she had ever expected to land on her doorstep; she didn’t have the natural instinct that Isla vaguely remembered her own mother possessing. She had to work at things to really become good at taking care of Isla, and she had noticed how pleased Elsie was when she noticed something that would normally be a motherly instinct.

“Aye, I will now,” Isla murmured as she started to get up off the bed.

“I’ve saved some soup in the pot on the stove,” her aunt said. “There’s also some bread on the side for ye.”

“I should be getting to bed,” Arran said as he too rose and started out of the room.

“Aye, I want to check yer head tomorrow to make sure that ye are healing fine,” Elsie’s voice followed them out of the room.

“Ye are right. I’ll get a good night of rest.” Arran bowed his head to

her before his eyes met Isla's once more. "I'll see ye both in the morning."

"Goodnight." Isla smiled from the kitchen as she watched him cross the room and take one of the spare beds in the other room. They didn't have any patients over night, but he still decided to give them some privacy.

As soon as Isla turned back to see her aunt, she could tell that she was going to get bombarded by questions. Elsie's eyebrows were raised and her expression was one of expectancy, as though she owed her aunt an explanation about something.

Isla bit her lip and couldn't help but smile sheepishly at her aunt, unsure of what to say.

"I suppose that Sara was right, aye?" Elsie asked with a slight chuckle. She shook her head and moved over to one of the cupboards, passing Isla a bowl for her soup.

"Things may be progressing..." Isla said, feeling unsure about how much to confide in her aunt. She had never been in the position before where she had to talk about her feelings in such a way; it felt strange and foreign to her, but Isla knew that her aunt wasn't going to stop pressing things.

"He is a very kind and respectful man," Elsie said as though she was thinking out loud.

"Do ye think?"

"I ken," her aunt nodded. "I can see it in his face, in the way that he acts. But..."

"But what?" Isla felt her heart drop at seeing her aunt's hesitation.

"But it would be a rather... ambitious match." She eventually decided on the word as though it had been a difficult decision to do so.

Isla knew exactly what her aunt was talking about. Elsie's concerns mirrored her own.

"I spoke with him about that today, but he does nae seem to care about such things," Isla explained. "He said that he is a Laird and that he can be with whoever he wants."

"But ye understand that he cannae stay here forever?" Elsie was speaking very carefully as she sat down at the kitchen table and let her head rest against her hand.

"Aye," Isla said, feeling her chest tighten. She tried to focus on pouring the soup, but the conversation was causing her hand to shake slightly. "He said that I should come with him."

Her words hung in the air for a little while longer than she would have wanted, but Isla waited patiently for her aunt's response.

"Ye should go."

"Really?" Isla blinked as she quickly put down the ladle and turned to gawk at Elsie with wide eyes. "Ye mean it?"

"Aye, it would be foolish of me to think that ye would want to stay here forever." Her aunt's voice sounded a little smaller. Her tone was filled with a heaviness that Isla only rarely heard when she asked questions about her parents. "I knew that one day ye would want to leave, whether that be to pursue yer own life or to find a husband to settle down with. Never did I think that ye would find a Laird."

They both laughed at her words, but Isla could tell that Elsie was just trying to mask how she was really feeling by trying to find something to smile about.

"I told him that I would have to think about it," Isla said, hoping that it would soften the blow.

"And what is there to think about?"

Isla paused for a moment, unsure if her aunt was asking her to test her, or that she really couldn't see the truth. "Ye! There's ye to think about. I would be leaving ye to live on yer own."

"I have my patients, and I have people like Sara who come to see me," Elsie quickly replied. "Isla, I have been thinking about this moment

ever since ye started to grow up. All of a sudden it just felt as though I had nay control over ye or how long that ye would be here with me. I've learned how to savor every moment of ye living here."

She could feel her throat tightening at her aunt's words, but Isla didn't want to get emotional in front of her. She knew that it would do neither of them any good yet to begin thinking about the short time they had left living together.

"I really dinnae have to accept his offer if ye think that it would be bad," Isla said quickly. "I could stay here with ye, and I could just continue working, and-"

"Isla, there is nay point in ye staying here when yer life is clearly telling ye to go elsewhere." Elsie's voice was a little stronger as she spoke. "Ye need to go out there and follow yer path, for it has ended living here."

"But what if it's a mistake?" Isla asked, slightly nervous about leaving the forest. "I trust Arran, I ken that my feelings for him grow by the day, but what if I'm nae received well in his castle?"

Elsie paused for a moment before sitting back in her chair. Isla recognized the pause as a moment where her aunt would "center" herself. "When ye were born, it was never part of the plan for ye to end up in my care and lived under my roof now, was it? But it has worked, and I have loved raising ye as my own. When ye saw Arran by the stream, that was also never part of the plan, yet it is a chance that I think ye should take."

"So ye think that I should just pack up this life, everything I've ever known and... follow my heart?" Isla couldn't quite believe that she was saying it out loud. It sounded both ridiculous and thrilling at the same time, and she still couldn't quite grasp whether or not it was the right thing to do.

"Aye, exactly." Elsie nodded. "Ye have to go out there and find yer path, because it has become obscured by the undergrowth. I'm afraid that it's time for ye to take matters into yer own hands and find that path once more."

That night, as Isla lay in her bed, her mind was buzzing with the prospect of leaving everything that comforted her behind. Entering a

new life wasn't going to be easy, and while she did feel a little more relaxed with the idea of Arran being at her side, she was still incredibly hesitant about it.

“How are ye feeling this morning?” Elsie asked as Isla stepped out of her room and looked around the quiet kitchen.

“Where’s Arran?”

“I sent him out to get some more herbs,” Elsie said with a shrug. “I have a patient scheduled to get here early, and so I sent him only a little while ago. But ye are dodging my question.”

“I feel fine,” Isla lied. “But I need to go and speak with Lachlan first.”

“Ye will tell him goodbye?” Elsie asked.

“I dinnae ken when Arran wants to leave, but I’m going to tell him that I’m leaving.”

Isla felt uneasy even as she spoke about her plan, but she knew that it would be the right thing to do. It would be her way of giving them both closure, even though it was very likely to break both of their hearts.

“He has nae been around to apologize, are ye sure that this will be the safest thing for ye to do?”

“Lachlan will nae harm me,” Isla said, shaking her head. “He will listen to me.”

She couldn’t guarantee that, but she wanted to think that their years of friendship would still mean something to him.

Isla walked quickly through the forest to get to where Lachlan resided.

She didn't want Arran to catch her and ask what she was doing. She wasn't sure why, but she felt as though it would be a betrayal to him. But Isla wanted to speak with Lachlan; she wanted to let him know that she would be going away.

At first glance, his cottage looked slightly abandoned. It was as though nobody had lived there for some time. The only sign that Lachlan was home came from the small chimney valve; thin smoke trickled into the sky above.

"Lachlan," Isla called against the door after he failed to answer. "It's me, Isla," she said after knocking a few more times.

Finally, sounds of life came from within the dark cottage. Lachlan appeared at the door with bags under his eyes, a downcast look, and a purple cheek. Isla had to stop herself from gasping at his appearance as she felt something pinch in her stomach.

"What do ye want?" he murmured, looking down at the floor.

"I came to talk with ye, it's been a few days and..."

"And what? Ye thought that everything would be fine again?" Lachlan scoffed and shook his head.

"I wanted to tell ye that I'm sorry," Isla said after letting out a heavy exhale. "I should have known this was how ye felt, I should have seen it. I'm sorry that ye've had to keep this a secret for so long."

Upon hearing her words, Isla could see the slight glimmer of hope that lit up in his dark eyes. Lachlan's gaze met hers and Isla knew that it was going to be a rather difficult conversation to have.

"Ye have come to tell me something, nae just to see how I am," he remarked, gesturing for her to come in.

The shutters were closed, but a few candles were trying their best to illuminate the space around them. Isla stepped gingerly into the cottage, aware of how hesitant her movements were. She thought she was being foolish for being so wary about someone she'd known for most of her life, but the Lachlan she'd seen the other day was not the boy she'd grown up with.

“Lachlan, ye have always been my best friend, the person that I’m closest to in this world.”

“I thought that I was yer only friend,” Lachlan chuckled, but Isla couldn’t find it in her to laugh. “Ye were saying?”

“I think we both always kent that I would nae be able to stay with my aunt forever. That one day I would have to find my own life, find a... husband. I would have to follow my own path,” Isla said while trying to remember the way that Elsie had phrased it. “And I think that I’m going to be leaving my aunt’s cottage very soon.”

The words felt as though they were instantly swallowed by the room around her. The air was heavy, thick with a tension that was built from so many layers, that Isla had no other option but to try and ignore it.

“Ye are leaving?” Lachlan blinked and stood up a little straighter. She didn’t like watching him trying to work out why she would be leaving, but the realization was slowly starting to bloom in his expression.

“Aye.”

“And ye will be leaving... on yer own?”

Isla was impressed with how he’d phrased the question. It backed her into a corner, leaving her with no choice but to admit what was happening.

“Nae exactly...” Isla started while shifting from one foot to the other. “I’m going to be visiting where Arran is from first, but-”

“I knew it,” Lachlan shook his head and turned away from her. He walked deeper into the room until Isla was forced to squint in an effort to see him. The unease within her was only continuing to grow by the second, and Isla was terrified that he would lash out in the same way that he had done to Arran.

She was beginning to regret going to see him, but she didn’t know what to do to resolve it anymore. She had to tell him the truth.

“Our feelings for one another have developed into something that we

both want to explore,” Isla continued, knowing that she had no other option. “I’m so sorry, Lachlan, but I will be going with him to his castle.”

“Of course ye will,” he nodded and sighed. “I was going to apologize for the way that I lashed out at him, but I dinnae think that I am sorry anymore. I have loved ye for years, and he has just come along in the last two weeks. It’s nae fair...”

Isla swallowed thickly, not knowing how to react to the waver in Lachlan’s voice.

“I’m sorry, I really am,” she said. “I want to go with him, and I cannae stay here for the rest of my life, ye ken that too.”

Lachlan turned to look at her and even in the half-light, she could make out the tears brimming in his eyes. Her heart felt as though it had plummeted into her gut as she swallowed thickly and tried not to think about the hurt that her words were causing him.

“Ye are choosing him over me,” he said it as though it was a fact that he would have to accept; there was no questioning in his voice. All of the hope had left his eyes.

“I’m going on my own path, Lachlan,” Isla said once again. “But I promise that I will come back and visit ye as much as I can.”

“Save it. I dinnae want to see ye again.”

“Dinnae be like that,” Isla sighed.

“Ye have hurt me in a way that I never thought ye were capable of.” Lachlan’s tone was laced with venom as he spoke. Isla felt speechless as she stared at him in disbelief. His fists were clenched and she took a step back as he walked toward her.

“Lachlan...”

“Nay, ye have caused me such sadness that I dinnae want to see ye again,” he said, shaking his head. “Get out.”

“We can talk about this, I want to come and visit ye and still be

friends with-”

“Get out!”

Isla gasped at the sudden increase in volume. The thin walls shook around them, and tears started to form in her eyes. Without waiting another moment, she fled from the cottage, her boots thudding against his wooden floorboards.

She didn’t let the tears fall from her eyes until she was back out in the brightness of day; the wind stung her tears as they trailed down her cheeks. Isla wiped her face but didn’t stop running until the cottage was no longer visible behind her.

Her heart pounded and she was shaking slightly, but her tears ebbed quickly as she felt anger about the situation. Lachlan wasn’t being a good friend; he was acting out against her in a way that she hadn’t thought he would be capable of.

She was angry that he didn’t want to at least still see her, but it was his decision and she knew that it would be the right thing to respect it. He was the only other person that she’d thought she could count on in her life. Isla was beginning to realize that she could have been very wrong about that assumption.

She hugged her arms to her chest while walking the remainder of the way back to the cottage. Isla kept her eyes to the floor as she thought about how Lachlan had just reacted, how that would be the last time that she would probably see him. A lump was forming in her throat, but she pushed away from her sadness, too angry to permit herself to mourn the loss of his friendship.

Friends were supposed to be happy for one another. He was supposed to be excited that she was going to find happiness. She took a lot longer than normal to get home. Isla found that her feet were dragging, and she was waiting for her mind to settle before putting on a brave face. Isla knew that her aunt would have her questions and that Arran too would want to know about what she’d done, but Isla didn’t want to get emotional while speaking to them about it.

Isla stepped back into the cottage and tried to form a smile on her lips, however, it faltered almost instantly as she saw the scene inside of the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” Isla asked as she stared between Sara, her aunt, and Arran.

“Sara said that there’s been lots of talk in the village,” Elsie said, sitting forward. The three of them looked as though they were on the edges of their seats. They were clearly anxious, and Arran’s brow was furrowed into a tight frown.

“The people of the McCann clan think that Arran is dead,” Sara said, clearly unable to stop herself from explaining the village gossip once more.

“What?” Isla’s eyes widened.

Arran sighed heavily and looked up at her. “I have to return to my clan, and I’m going to leave at first light.”

Isla was in shock as she stared from her aunt to Arran. Her heart was thumping so loud in her chest that she wondered if the three people sitting in front of her could hear it. The realization of what had been said was sinking in, and Isla understood that there was a much bigger decision ahead of her.

“Ye are leaving tomorrow?” she breathed out.

“I will be leaving now,” Sara murmured as she quickly rose from her seat, sensing the tension in the room.

“I have to go, my mother is worried sick,” Arran rose from his chair and quickly moved to stand in front of Isla. “But I want ye to come with me.”

“Aye, it’s just so soon,” Isla said, turning to Elsie. “I want to come with ye, but I’m just worried about leaving my aunt here on her own.”

“Dinnae worry about me,” Elsie said as she stood to join the conversation. “I have Lachlan nearby, I have my friends in the village, I will be fine here.”

Isla bit her lip as she thought about leaving the cottage with such little notice; it was all happening so quickly and she wasn’t sure what to do.

“I have to go,” Arran said once more. “I cannae let my mother suffer like that.”

“I understand,” Isla nodded, but she kept her gaze on the woman who had raised her since she was a child.

“It’s like ye were saying before; ye can always come and visit me, I’ll be here.”

Isla felt her heart break as she realized that she would be leaving her aunt. Elsie had been so supportive of her and had always been good to her. She didn’t like the sense that she was abandoning her.

“I’m going to miss ye every day,” Isla said after a long pause.

“Aye, I ken, but I will never be too far away from ye.”

“I promise that we will come back and visit ye very soon,” Arran nodded. “I just need to make sure that my clan and my family are all right.”

Isla moved over to her aunt and quickly embraced her, feeling the warmth of the woman who had been the mother she’d lost all those years ago.

“It’s going to be all right,” Elsie reassured her. “This is yer path, and I’m so proud of ye for following it.”

“I will make sure that she’s fine in her new home,” Arran said from her side as Isla reluctantly pulled away from her aunt. She knew that it would only be the first of many embraces until the last moment.

“Thank ye, Arran,” Elsie smiled up at him.

“I went to see Lachlan,” Isla decided to speak since they were all revealing things.

“Ye did?” Arran blinked in surprise.

“Aye, I had to go and see him to tell him that I would be coming with ye. Although, I did nae think that it would be so soon,” Isla admitted with a light laugh.

“How is he doing?” her aunt asked.

“He was... clearly still upset,” Isla found herself having to pick her words well. The last thing that she wanted was to paint him in a bad light - after everything, he was still someone that she had cared about

for years. "I dinnae think that he was ready to see me, and so I think I may have made it a little bit worse."

"Did he hurt ye?" Arran asked, stepping forward. Isla could see the way he tensed at the thought, but she quickly shook her head.

"Nay, he just shouted a little..."

"I swear that I'll-"

"Nay," Isla said as she pushed at his chest and stared up at him intently. "Thank ye, but it will do ye no good to be violent with him again. He's just upset, and I ken that I would be the same if I was in his position. I dinnae blame him, but he's clearly feeling a lot of anger toward the situation. He told me that he does nae want to speak to me again."

"I'm sure that he was just being dramatic." Elsie tried to cut through the tension with her words.

Isla sighed, wishing that her aunt's words had provided some kind of comfort. "Nay, he was completely serious."

"He still should ken nae to speak to a lady like that," Arran continued. His jaw was clenched and his brows were furrowed, but Isla took his hand in an attempt to calm him down.

"He just needs time," Elsie said.

"Well, he's going to get time," Isla sighed. "I thought that I would be able to go and speak with him before leaving, but nae if we leave at first light. It would be too soon."

"I think it would be wise to wait until the next time that the two of ye visit," Elsie nodded.

Isla was in shock that she would become simply a visitor in her own home; it felt as though she would be regressing in status. The castle would not be her home for some time. She was sure that it would require many days, perhaps weeks before she felt properly settled.

"I will leave ye both to talk about this," Arran announced as he bowed

his head. "I feel that I need some rest before the big day tomorrow."

"Aye, goodnight." Isla smiled up at him as her aunt also bid him goodnight.

"I dinnae want to leave ye." Isla's voice sounded a lot smaller almost as soon as Arran had left the room.

"I would like to see ye in a few weeks. I'm sure that ye will have a very different opinion then," her aunt said with a chuckle. "Believe me, I am sad to see ye go, but - as I said before - I've been preparing for this moment for a very long time."

"It's still going to be difficult to wake up and nae have ye around as someone to turn to." Isla groaned as she sat down at the table once more.

"Ye will have new people that will entertain and guide ye. He is a Laird, after all, I'm sure that ye will have the best advisors and people around ye at all times."

"I want ye, I dinnae want them." Isla knew that she was just complaining to mask the sadness that was building up. "I feel scared."

"I think that it's natural for ye to feel like that," Elsie said with a shrug. "Yer life is about to change forever."

"But what if I'm making the wrong choice? I'll be leaving ye, the only person in my life that did nae disappear. I could be acting foolish."

"Isla, ye would be foolish to stay," her aunt said. "I have been out there, I've experienced different parts of this land, and this is where I reside now. But ye need to go out there and do the same thing. Ye need to live. Ye would be a fool to nae follow that, and ye would be an even bigger fool to nae go with someone who loves ye."

"I could stay here. Lachlan loves me." Isla regretted the words as soon as they left her lips.

"But ye dinnae love him, and that would end yer friendship in an instant. It could even be enough to cause his love to fizzle out."

Isla thought about this for a moment while frowning; deep down, she knew that she'd already made up her mind, she would go with Arran and be happy in his castle.

"Ye are a kind soul, Isla," her aunt continued. "The people of the clan will love ye, Arran loves ye, and ye can go on to that life in the knowledge that I love ye dearly too."

The two of them broke out into smiles at her aunt's words. Isla was trying to push down her feeling of guilt toward Elsie, she didn't want to leave her on her own.

"I'm glad that ye went to see Lachlan today," Elsie said.

"Aye, but he was nae happy to see me," Isla said while rubbing a hand over her face. "He was very upset that I had come to see him and that I didnae come to confess my love, but the opposite."

"He will heal. His heart will find a way to cope and I'm sure that in time, the two of ye will be able to resume yer friendship."

"I hope that ye are right," Isla said and nodded. "But my heart lies with Arran, and that is a relationship that I want to pursue."

"I must warn ye that there may be ladies in his clan that were already anticipating his hand in marriage. It is the kind of life where ye must stick up for yerself and nae rely on the people around ye to do so. But ye ken yer worth, dinnae let high-borns tell ye otherwise."

Isla was agreeing along with her aunt's words, taking them in and making a note in her mind so that she wouldn't forget when she arrived.

"Will ye do one more thing for me?"

"Aye, of course, anything," Isla said quickly, nodding enthusiastically.

"Ye should ask around about yer parents," Elsie said, causing Isla's eyebrows to raise in surprise. "Both on the journey through different towns, and perhaps even when ye reach the castle. Just try to find out what ye can about Caitlyn and Oscar from Baillie Clan. I'm sure that there must be someone out there who kens something."

“Aye, of course, I will,” Isla said. She would have been lying if she’d said that she wasn’t curious about what had happened to them, but she wasn’t sure if she wanted to learn the truth. She was sure that it wouldn’t be good news, and she had always tried to ignore the grief that ebbed away at her heart.

“I love ye so much,” Elsie sighed. “It will be strange at first, a much quieter house.”

“Aye,” Isla laughed. “And ye will have to collect yer own herbs now.”

“It will mean getting up a little earlier than usual, but I’m used to that.”

“I’m definitely going to miss gathering things and making tinctures for people,” Isla said, turning to take in the room around her.

“Ye can show the people of the clan how to do it,” Elsie suggested. “They will be impressed that a girl like ye has such a knowledge of plants and herbs.”

The more that she thought about it, the more that Isla realized she could succeed in the life that was being offered to her. There was the possibility that people would really warm to her.

“I was skeptical that ye were falling in love with that man for a while before ye told me, but now I can see it in the way that ye both look at one another,” her aunt smiled fondly as she spoke.

“Aye, it feels like I’m wandering down a path, but I get lost whenever his gaze catches mine.”

Isla smiled as she saw her aunt’s face light up at her comment.

“Go after him, because a love like that does nae come by every day.”



Isla awoke the next morning with a heavy heart. She wasn’t ready for the journey ahead, but she knew that she had no choice but to make herself as prepared as she could be. They didn’t have any horses, and so they were going to have to go into the nearest town to purchase

them. Arran had insisted, since it would make the journey much faster.

The morning light was already cutting through her window, and although it was dull, Isla was squinting as she stared around her room. It would be the last morning that she woke up in her own bedroom, and she wasn't sure whether she was pleased to be leaving such a small space or not.

It was her home, but the walls had cushioned her for long enough. Quickly, she started to gather up her belongings, making sure to only take the things that she held most dear to her. She had never kept too many things in her room due to the minimal space that was available to her, and Isla was grateful for that fact since she had less to pack. She placed her few good dresses onto her pile before beginning to gather up the things that she was going to take with her.

"Are ye ready for this?" Arran asked almost as soon as Isla opened the door. She could see the almost boyish smile on his face, and she knew that he was incredibly excited to go home.

"Good morning to ye too," she chuckled. "Aye, I'm almost ready, I just need to finish packing and have some quick breakfast."

"All right," Arran smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed a kiss to her lips. Isla smiled into the gesture, excited about the fact that it was sure to be the first of many kisses over the coming hours.

"I'm going to miss this place," Isla muttered more to herself than anyone else as she stared around the kitchen. It was easily the largest room in the cottage, bursting with activity on every shelf and in every corner. She knew that there were tinctures and poultices that her aunt would be busy making even as they were leaving, but it was a life that Isla knew she would perhaps have to leave behind. She wasn't even sure if half of the plants would grow in the land where Arran was from.

"I'm going to miss ye." Elsie's voice drifted in from the front door as she walked in with open arms. Isla quickly moved to embrace her aunt, wincing at the way that it felt so natural to hug her, and yet, there was only a numbered amount of times that she would be able to do it so easily. "But ye are so grown up, and I ken that ye are going to

do so well out there. Ye also have a great man to take care of ye.”

“Thank ye, Elsie,” Arran chuckled by the kitchen table. “I do promise to look after Isla, and I will do my best to protect her from the big bad world.”

The three of them chuckled at his comment, but Isla knew that there would be a lot more at stake out there than there was from within the safety of the cottage. It made her think of her parents and how they had disappeared. Isla knew deep down that there was a very slim chance that they were even still alive, and she knew that the only reason they had disappeared was because of the cruel world out there. However, Isla tried to think of the world like the hemlock that she gathered for her aunt; it could be deadly, it could be very easy to make a fatal mistake, but if she was careful, it could be the best thing for her.

Isla continued to gather up the few belongings that made sense for her to take with her, although, they were going to be limited until they bought horses. Isla had almost forgotten that since Arran was a Laird, the financial burden of buying the animals was not going to be a problem.

“There’s one thing I need to do,” Isla muttered more to herself than either her aunt or Arran. She quickly turned on her heels and made for the cupboard on her left. It was a door that she hadn’t opened since the day that they had found Arran, but she knew that she had a duty to return to him what was his.

He remembered who he was now, and it was obvious that he wasn’t a danger to her. Isla felt completely comfortable retrieving his sword from the cupboard and returning it to its owner.

“I took it off ye when we brought ye back here,” Isla explained as she held the sheathed weapon out to Arran. “I was worried that ye would attack us, I hope ye can understand that?”

“Aye, I understand why ye had to,” Arran said while shrugging his shoulders. “It was a smart move on yer part,” he said while chuckling.

“All right,” she said, straightening up and turning her gaze from her full pack to her aunt. “I’m ready.”

“This is really it,” Elsie said in a rather tight tone. Isla suddenly realized that her aunt was fighting back tears. “I promised myself that I would nae cry when this moment came,” she said, chuckling and shaking her head.

“It’s all right,” Isla muttered as she moved forward and quickly embraced her aunt. “Thank ye from the bottom of my heart... for everything, I would nae be here today if it weren’t for ye and yer generosity.”

“Nonsense.” Elsie tried to brush it off. “Ye are my blood, I would do it all again in a heartbeat if it meant that ye would be able to get to this point and live a good life.”

“Ye have given me more than I ever expected,” Isla continued as tears started to brim in her own eyes. “I wish that there was a way that I could repay the years of kindness that ye have shown me.”

“Go out there and be happy; that is the only kind of repayment that I would like to see,” her aunt said, gesturing to the world outside of their cottage.

Isla let her forehead rest against Elsie’s for a moment, wincing at the tears that fell freely between them. The moment was incredibly bittersweet, but they were both trying to focus on the positives.

“Thank ye for everything, Elsie,” Arran said as he moved to embrace her as soon as Isla had moved back.

“Take care of her,” Elsie managed to say. She was a small woman, and Arran towered over her even as he tried to embrace her.

“I promise ye that I will,” he nodded quickly. “And I will repay the debt that I owe ye for saving my life.”

“Ye ken that ye have nay need to do such a thing,” she chuckled. “I am just glad that ye have come into our lives.”

“Yer kindness is admirable,” Arran beamed down at her before moving back to stand next to Isla. “I suppose this is it.”

“Aye,” Isla swallowed thickly and glanced around the cottage for one

final time. “This is it.”

They said one final goodbye to Elsie before Isla entwined his fingers with hers. She felt herself smile at the feeling of her hand in his. They started off down the path that Isla definitely took the least; it was the path that would lead them through the town, and would eventually lead them to her new home.

Jonah walked the halls of the McCann clan with a new confidence in his step and a smug smile on his face. They loved him. The people of the castle and the clan were warming to him because he had money, and he wasn't afraid of talking about it. The clan had been through its fair share of hardship, and Jonah understood that it must be refreshing to so many to see a new face, someone who wanted to lead.

While he hadn't made his ambitions too vocal, he was beginning to sow the seeds that would soon secure him a better position within the clan.

He walked through the corridor, listening to the satisfying sound of leather boot soles on stone as he went. Jonah had made it a mission of his to get to know some of the guards around the castle, and that meant that as he passed by certain doorways, he could give them all a friendly nod. He knew the tactics, the ways to weave into a clan and get what he wanted. But this clan was weak, surviving without a leader for as long as it could bear, and Jonah knew that the conversation was on the tips of every advisor's tongue.

Jonah couldn't help but reflect on how far he'd come. Growing up in a time and place where nobody cared for him, a low born with higher ambition than his rank would let him seize, he had managed to make something of his life regardless of all the things that people had said to him over the years.

He smiled at the thought of finally getting what he had wanted. He was already the Laird of another clan, which had been a feat in itself, but now he wanted more. He wanted to expand the land of his own clan and become one of the more influential players in the game of clans and politics.

Jonah continued walking until an exit to the castle was visible from up ahead, he knew exactly where he was going, and he knew what he needed to do.

“Ach, my lady, what a surprise to see ye here,” he remarked upon stepping out into the dusty morning light. The sun was struggling to penetrate the clouds, and the wind was already picking up.

“My Laird,” Keira bowed her head as she quickly rose from her seat to deliver a polite curtsy. She appeared startled by his sudden presence, as though caught off guard, but Jonah wasn’t going to leave her alone so easily. “Apologies, I was just praying.”

“Praying for what, my dear?” Jonah asked as he took a seat next to her without waiting to be invited to do so. He knew that if he was going to get what he wanted, he would have to bend a few rules.

“For the safe return of my brother, of course,” Keira said, her brows twitching down into a frown for a moment. Jonah found himself having to bite his tongue so that he wouldn’t say something heartless about how her hope would be in vain. She had dark circles under her eyes, and Jonah had heard from some of the servants that he tipped off that she hadn’t been eating.

“Ye have such a kind and sweet soul,” he said instead, putting on his best smile. Keira’s eyes were on his, but they weren’t filled with any kind of intrigue, only confusion.

“I just want to ken that he’s alive and safe, but the longer that time stretches away from the event...”

“I ken, it’s so very hard,” Jonah said with a heavy sigh. He took the opportunity to move a little closer to her on the bench. They sat under one of the birch trees that had been planted in the courtyard, the kind whose trunks contrasted with the dark color of the bricks around them; the castle towered over mother nature’s own growth. “Yer family is in my own prayers. I think that the entire clan is praying for the safe return of Arran.”

“And there are still nay witnesses that may have known what happened to him?” Keira asked, a glimmer of hope shining in her eyes.

“Nae yet, but the guards are still asking around,” Jonah said. “I’m sure that someone must ken something.”

“Colton has been out looking for him again,” Keira admitted. “I hope that he finds something soon.”

Jonah once more kept quiet for a moment before speaking, not trusting his initial reaction to her words. “He is going out alone?”

“I dinnae ken, but all I ken is that he’s been searching for Arran every moment that he can get. He’s been going out further and further, but I think he wants to go for a few days if he can spare them.”

“I see,” Jonah murmured. “What if he is unsuccessful?”

“How could ye even think that?” Keira sat back slightly in surprise, and Jonah knew that approaching the subject would require being even more delicate than normal.

“I’m only voicing the concerns of the people that I have spoken to,” he said while holding his hands up in defense. “They are worried, and they dinnae have a leader, nobody to look up to.”

Keira moved only to push a stray strand of brown hair behind her ear, but he could tell that she was now slightly more wary of his words.

“He will be home soon, I just ken it,” she whispered.

“And what if he is nae?” Jonah asked. “I have many years on ye, and I have enough experience to ken that there is something that needs to be done in this situation. Ye cannae just wait around for Arran to return, if he’s even alive, and-”

“He is,” Keira quickly cut in.

Jonah found himself being rather bolder than he usually would in such circumstances. He took hold of Keira’s hand, sensing her unease about the situation as he did so.

“Keira, yer brother is still too young to have such a responsibility placed onto his shoulders,” Jonah began.

“Arran was almost just as young when Father passed and he became Laird,” she said. Her hand in his was a strange interaction, it was almost as though hers had gone limp, that she wasn’t bothering for the pleasantries of it.

“He is still too young, I think that we both ken it,” Jonah continued as though she had never spoken up. “But ye... ye could be the one to rule as well.”

“Me?” she blinked in shock.

“Aye, ye could rule by my side. I would be willing to make that happen so that this land would be yers,” he said with a devious smile playing on his lips. He saw the way that her eyes widened at his offer, but it was evident that she was still cautious about it.

“Ye want to be Laird?” Keira asked as her expression settled into one that he could not read.

“I want to have ye by my side,” he said, leaning closer to her and giving her hand a small squeeze. “Think about how great we would be together, Keira.”

“I... I dinnae think that this would be a smart match,” she said rather diplomatically. “I am much too young, and ye have many years on me.”

“I can provide great wisdom for this clan, just as I have to my own clan,” he said triumphantly.

“I’ve heard the stories of how ye managed that. How do I ken that ye will nae just kill us to get what ye want?”

Jonah stiffened at her words. For a moment, he forgot about his goal and glared at her.

“What is going on out here?” a familiar voice interrupted.

Jonah let his eyes close for a moment as he realized that his plan was already beginning to unravel.

Keira’s mother, Rowan, was walking quickly across the courtyard to

where he was sitting with her. He noticed how quickly she moved away from him, tugging until he let go of her hand.

“Ah, just the other lovely lady that I was needing to see this fine morning,” Jonah said, quickly plastering a smile onto his face.

“What is the meaning of this?” Rowan asked, staring at Jonah.

“My lady,” he said, bowing his head. “There is a very important question that I have tried to ask yer daughter, but I see now that I should have come to ye for yer blessing.”

“My blessing?” Rowan frowned as she glanced between the two of them.

“Aye, I have asked for Keira’s hand in marriage,” Jonah said with a smile on his face. “I am captivated by yer daughter, and since I am already a Laird, I think that it would be a smart match for our two clans.”

Jonah wasn’t sure how his announcement would be received, but he hadn’t been expecting Rowan’s expression to drop quite so suddenly. He sucked in a tight breath and waited as the widow shook her head and took a step back.

“I cannae be thinking of this right now,” she said eventually. All Jonah was hearing was that it wasn’t an outright no. “Nae when I have one son out looking for the other. Do ye nae think that we have more important matters to consider right now?”

“Aye, I ken, but-”

“He thinks that Arran is dead,” Keira told her mother. “He thinks that we should rule the clan together instead.”

“I am trying to be realistic,” he said upon seeing the way that Rowan regarded him. “I dinnae want ye to be invaded by some other group who try to take yer clan.”

“Ye are looking out for yer own interests,” Rowan said, narrowing her eyes. “Ye have yer own clan that ye already neglect - I’ve heard the stories, dinnae look at me like that - and so I would never let ye rule

over our clan.”

Jonah was seething as she spoke to him, he couldn't believe that she had the courage to speak such harsh truths to him while people walked past them and could openly hear their conversation.

“I dinnae ken what ye are talking about; my loyalties have always been with yer family. I want nothing more than to see ye all happy and safe, but right now ye are weak, and ye would be easy to invade.”

“Perhaps our invaders are a lot closer to us than we realized,” Rowan nodded, her eyes never leaving his.

Keira took the moment of silence after her mother's words to move away from Jonah and over to Rowan, standing just behind her as though her mother would be able to defend her against Jonah.

“I want ye off of our land, I ken exactly what ye are up to,” Rowan continued.

“Ye dinnae ken what ye are saying,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “Ye are turning away one of the only allies that this clan has left!”

“I dinnae think that ye are much of an ally right now. Ye have accepted that the Laird is dead,” Rowan said back.

“I am trying to help ye!” Jonah fired back with a loud shout. “I am trying to ensure the survival of this clan!”

“We dinnae need yer help,” Rowan said. “Guards! Seize him!”

“No, wait! Please!”

Jonah was panicking. His plan had fallen apart right in front of his eyes, and all because he had been too bold, too greedy in wanting to succeed too early. He grimaced as the men clad in armor ran toward him, the metal clanking with each step they took. Jonah knew there was no point in running, so all he did was glare at the two women in front of him.

“Ye are making an awful mistake,” he said. “Ye are leaving yerselves exposed, allowing it to be easy for yer enemies to get to ye.”

“We will figure that out on our own from now on, Jonah,” Keira’s mother spoke back to him.

“Goodbye, Jonah,” Keira said.



Keira watched the weasel of a man being dragged away and off of their land. Relief flooded through her that she would no longer have to deal with his strange advances and comments. She was still in shock that he had wanted to marry her in the first place. It felt rather out of character for him, and she was sure that it was all part of some kind of scheme of his.

“I’m glad to see the back of him, in all honesty,” her mother admitted as he was dragged out of sight.

“Me too,” Keira found herself chuckling.

“Colton left earlier,” her mother said, turning to her. “He’s taken a pack and he’s going further out. I dinnae ken when he will be back, but I think that he intends to be gone for quite a few days.”

“I hope that he will come back to us.” Keira bit her lip as she stared out at the view of the town below the castle. “I hope that he will come back safe, and with Arran.”

Colton sighed as he knew that he would have to get back on his horse and try again in the next village. The day was a lot warmer than he had anticipated, and he was constantly moving around all the time. He was sure that his shirt would appear a shade darker than it was originally because of the sweat that he was exuding, and he was constantly having to wipe his brow.

The villages so far had been a dead end. Some people didn't even know who he was talking about, and that was how Colton had realized that he'd crossed over into another clan's land.

He was feeling more and more disheartened the further out that he went; nobody was helping him, and nobody knew anything that would at least even give him some kind of lead.

The next village wasn't too far of a ride from the one that he was just leaving, but he had decided in his mind that it would be the last village of the day. He was tired and had exhausted his manners when it came to talking with people, but he knew that manners would get him a long way in talking with strangers.

His horse's hooves thundered against the dry road as he was met with more and more trees. The landscape was slowly turning into a forest, and Colton was feeling dread rise up within him like a heavy weight that he couldn't control. If Arran had gone into the forests, it would take an incredibly long time to comb through and find him.

The wind was tossing his hair, it was a refreshing feeling against the heat that was coming off of him. However, he knew that he would heat up almost as soon as the horse slowed to a trot as the village rose up in front of him.

He had been riding already for a few days after saying goodbye to his mother, he hadn't been able to go and see Keira before leaving because he had been anxious to get on the road and find Arran. The further out that he went, the more that he started to regret not going to find her to at least say goodbye.

Finally, he pulled on the reins and stopped the horse from riding too fast. His heart plummeted as he saw the size of the small village before him. It didn't look like the kind of place that would have any answers.

"Excuse me, sir," Colton called to one of the men on the main road of the village. "My name is Colton Woods of Clan McCann. I'm searching for my brother, Laird Arran. Have ye seen him?"

"Nay," the man said, quickly shaking his head and going on his way.

Colton felt his nostrils flare, but he tried hard to push down the frustration that was rising within him. He was finding it difficult to believe that some people weren't even willing to help him find his brother.

"Excuse me!" he called to a small group of people and repeated the information that he had already said so many times that day. Once more, he was met by shaking heads. "I can offer a reward; more gold than any of ye could spend in a lifetime."

He didn't like to beg, it felt wrong for someone of his status to sound so desperate. But he was desperate, and Colton was beginning to run out of ideas.

"Please," he called out so that more people around him could hear. "Has anyone seen or heard anything strange about a Laird in these parts?"

"Aye!"

For a moment, Colton almost completely disregarded what he'd heard. He blinked a couple of times and realized that he had heard someone come forward about his request. A small and rather plump woman stepped forward with a wary look on her face.

"Ye have information about the Laird?"

“Why do ye want to know?” the woman looked rather cautious and wary, but he could tell that she was intelligent in being so careful.

“I am his brother, Colton. I’m searching for Laird Arran, have ye heard anything about him?”

“Aye.” Her kind features curled into a smile. “I saw him.”

“Ye did!” Colton’s eyes widened. “Ach, he’s alive, I knew he was alive.”

He let his hand run through his dark hair as he was unable to keep the smile off of his face.

“Follow that path,” the woman was pointing toward the other end of the village.

“The one leading into the forest?”

“Aye, follow it - dinnae deviate from the path once ye are past the tree line - and ye will find a cottage. A woman lives there, she’s a healer. Tell her that Sara sent ye there,” the woman said while continuing to smile at him.

“Aye, I will, oh thank ye so much!” he smiled and took her hands in his while bowing his head. “Ye have given me more information than anyone else in this whole land. Thank ye from the bottom of my heart.”

Colton couldn’t wait another moment; he quickly took the reins of his horse and started off down through the village. He couldn’t believe that his brother was so close, that he was even alive. He thought about how delighted and relieved both his mother and sister would be to learn that he was all right.

His legs were hurting, and the boots on his sweating feet were cutting at his ankles, the harsh leather causing them to ache. But Colton didn’t care; he quickly made it through the trees and found himself focusing on nothing other than the path ahead of him.

The forest was much quieter than the village had been, and Colton didn’t like the way that the atmosphere around him suddenly felt very

erie. He continued down the path and tried to ignore the way that the hair on the back of his neck was prickling. The forest didn't feel inviting. It blocked out the majority of the sunlight, dabbling shadows and causing the undergrowth to appear as though it was alive with movement.

He continued down the path until a cottage appeared in the distance just as the woman had said there would be. Colton couldn't believe that this was where his brother had been for so long, but he tried to push the disbelief from his mind as he walked up toward the cottage.

After tying up the horse's reins, he approached the small wooden door. The cottage itself was covered in thick ivy and other plants that were slowly creeping across the walls. It appeared as though Mother Nature was trying her best to claim the cottage, but whoever lived inside had been keeping her at bay.

Colton was hesitant to knock, but knew that he had no choice. No sound came from inside the cottage, but there was clearly someone home because of the smoke coming from the chimney. The door sounded hollow as he rapped his knuckles against it, but sound quickly came from inside.

"Can I help ye?" a woman's voice came from the small crack in the door that had been opened.

"Aye, I'm looking for Arran Woods? I was told by Sara in the village to come here to find him," he said, hearing that his voice was filled with uncertainty.

The woman opened the door further, revealing a rather unusual sight. Colton stared down at the woman with dark hair and large eyes. She peered at Colton in confusion.

"I'm his brother," he added to ease her criticalness.

"Aye, I think that ye should come in."

Colton listened intently to her story as she boiled some water for a herbal tea that smelled rather strange to him. For a moment, he was quite unsure about whether or not he should drink it. He didn't know if she would try to poison him or if he could even trust her.

“He was found by a stream,” Colton repeated as he closed his eyes.

“Aye, and he did nae have any memories when we found him, but we took him in and healed him. He’s on his way right now to the castle.”

“That’s great news,” he said with a small smile.

“But he’s nae traveling alone. He has gone with my niece,” the woman - Elsie she had said her name was - said.

“Why would he need to do that? I suppose she is a good escort?”

“She tended to his wounds,” Elsie continued. “She was the one that sat by his bedside and made sure that he would heal properly. The two of them were getting rather... close during his time here.”

Colton knew what she meant, but he wasn’t sure how to take the news. For their Laird to disappear and come back with some wild girl on his arm would definitely get people talking. Trying to imagine his brother in such a position wasn’t something that came easily to him.

“Well, that sounds like a whole other matter. I’m just glad that he is all right and finally safe.” Colton quickly shrugged off the news.

“He is, and the two of them should reach yer castle soon.”

“I suppose that I should get after them,” he muttered as he thought about the journey that now lay ahead of him. He was already tired from the grueling ride, and yet he was only halfway through reaching his goal.

“Ye are welcome to stay here for the night. I have many beds that I use for very sick patients,” Elsie offered.

“That is very kind of ye, but I think that I will head off now. I have a lot of ground to cover if I’m going to catch up to them.”

“Very well,” she nodded to him with a kind smile. Colton was almost unable to believe that after facing so much rejection on his journey to the village, he was now having to turn down acts of kindness from people that he didn’t even know. “I wish ye good luck with yer task. I’m sure that even if ye dinnae catch up to them, ye will see them

back at the castle.”

“Thank ye, Elsie.” Colton nodded. “And I promise to take good care of yer niece.”

“That is exactly what Arran said too,” she beamed at him. “Ye are good men, I can see that. I have no worries that Isla is in good hands.”

Colton said his thanks one more time before gathering his belongings and heading back out to where his horse was tied up. He couldn’t quite believe that he was going to have to ride all the way back, but he knew there was no point in dwelling on the inevitable.

He quickly walked through the forest and back out to where the tree line opened up to the main road up to the village. After mounting his horse, there was only one thing left to do. He grit his teeth and started on the ride that lay ahead of him.

Isla had lost track of the number of towns and small villages that they had gone through on the journey back to Arran's home. She held his hand as they walked in the morning light, browsing through markets and talking with locals. Her cheeks would hurt from smiling by the time that they would set off after a good breakfast.

She had noticed that the closer they got to his land, the more people were recognizing him. Isla was hoping that news would spread fast and that people would work to get the information back to his castle long before they arrived. She saw the way that people warmed to him when they realized who he was, and she enjoyed the reception that people were giving her too.

"I told ye that ye would be safe with me. Ye have nothing to worry about." Arran smiled one morning as he leaned in to kiss her.

"My Laird!" a man called to them. "My Laird, I have the finest bread for ye!"

They both turned to see that a baker was calling to them. Arran smiled widely as he walked over to the man and nodded to him, Isla held onto his hand and smiled too.

"Good morning," Arran said to the man. "I must try this fine bread, and then I will be the judge of whether it really is that fine!"

Isla saw the hesitation in the baker's eyes, as though he was doubting his own produce. She stifled a laugh as he hesitantly sliced a piece of what she assumed was his best loaf of the day.

"Thank ye," he nodded as he took the bread. "And some for my future

wife, here? She is perhaps the best critic of these things.”

Isla tried to ignore the way that her heart skipped at his comment, but her eyes lit up as she stared up at him.

“Do ye really mean that?” she whispered to him as the baker cut another slice for her.

“Aye, of course I do. Ye are the only person that I want to be with.” He smiled down at her before placing a tender kiss on her forehead.

Isla barely had more than a moment to process this before she was being handed a fluffy piece of bread.

“Thank ye.” She smiled and took a bite of it.

For the rest of the morning, her thoughts were distracted by the fact that he had called her his future wife. Over the past few days, they had grown a lot closer from being together while traveling, but that was still quite a statement to say. She rode on the back of his horse, holding onto him and enjoying the close contact that they were getting to share for long periods during the day.

Isla was in half a mind to think that she never wanted the traveling to end. She enjoyed the way that he would look at her as though she was the only person in the world, and Isla felt as though they were in their own bubble. Going to the castle would be a relief for Arran’s family, but it would make the small world that was only theirs much bigger.

That evening, they stayed at an inn just as they had done ever since they left her aunt’s house. She snuggled down into her bed and sighed in content as Arran moved under the covers on the other side of the bed.

“What has had ye so preoccupied all day?” he asked with a slight chuckle.

Isla turned over so that she was facing him and smiled lightly at him.

“Ye called me yer future wife,” she said with a slight chuckle.

“Aye, and that’s because I want to spend my future with ye.” Arran

smiled back at her. “I love ye, Isla, I really have fallen in love with ye.”

Her eyes widened for a moment as she tried to savor the words that had just left his lips. She couldn’t quite believe that he had spoken the words.

“I love ye too,” she whispered, leaning her head closer to his. Isla pressed her lips to his, closing the gap before either of them could say anything else.

In an instant, his hands were on her body, roaming around and exploring with a hunger that she hadn’t felt before. Isla felt Arran moving, although his lips never left hers, and he was quickly on top of her. She shuddered at the heat of his body on top of hers, but she also never wanted the moment to end.

“Ye are so beautiful,” he whispered while caressing the skin of her neck with his thumb. “I wish that we never have to leave this bed.”

“What about seeing yer family?” Isla asked back.

“I ken, but as soon as we’re at the castle, I can show ye my chambers and just how much I love ye.”

Before Isla could respond with a coherent sentence, a moan slipped out of her lips as Arran kissed down the trail that his thumb had taken. He persisted until both of his hands were on her shoulders and pushing her nightdress off, exposing more of her pale skin. She shuddered at the strange mixture of temperatures; the cool room was quickly combated by the hot contact between the two of them.



Arran clearly loved exploring her body, he loved that he was able to simply kiss her and elicit such a strong reaction. Isla shuddered and her back arched as he continued to trail down her body, making quick work of ridding her of her nightdress.

She looked so beautiful beneath him, and Arran caught himself feeling excited about bringing her back to the castle to meet his mother and siblings.

"I love ye," she whispered against him, spurring on his actions as Arran quickly rid himself of the shirt that he had been wearing to bed. He couldn't believe that he had been lucky enough to find someone like her and someone who would share in his feelings.

Arran quickly pushed back the covers, giving him better access to her as he kissed down her stomach, reaching her lower region. He couldn't help but smirk at the sight of her; already very wet and needy for him.

"I love seeing ye like this," he muttered and pressed a kiss to her most sensitive bundle of nerves. Instantly one of her hands flew to his hair, tangling themselves in the dark strands before tugging slightly harder than he had been expecting.

"Oh god," she groaned as he continued with his actions, growing with intensity after every few moments. "Arran."

Something primal stirred within him as she moaned his name. He wasn't sure what it was, but it drove his actions and made him want her more than anything in the world.

Slowly, he pushed one of his fingers against her entrance, feeling the wetness permitting him entrance. He was thrilled when she had told him that he was the first person who had ever touched her like that. He wanted to be the first to make her feel such intense pleasure.

She continued to moan and quiver as he added another finger, feeling just how tight she was as she writhed beneath him. Isla cried out as he started to curl his fingers up; he knew that it was clearly a spot she enjoyed him working.

"Oh god, I'm close," she said as he pressed his lips even harder to her clit. Isla was a moaning mess above him as she tried to contain her pleasure, but it was clearly a futile thing to do since she was so intensely enwrapped in it.

It took only a couple more thrusts with his fingers and she was coming undone. Her fingers tugged even harder at his hair, causing Arran to groan against her. He didn't let up until he was licking at her sensitive region, making sure that he had collected it all with his tongue.

Arran quickly moved back up to her and pressed a chaste kiss to her

lips as she panted heavily, still coming down from the sensations that she had experienced. He loved seeing her like that, breathless with swollen lips, and a lazy smile on her face.

“Do ye want to...” Isla’s voice trailed off as she gestured down to his lower region. Arran was slightly caught off guard by her words, for he hadn’t expected her to be the one to suggest such a thing.

“Aye, if ye are comfortable with that?” he asked, staring seriously at her. He didn’t want to make her do anything that she wasn’t going to enjoy; that wasn’t what he wanted with her. “I want to please ye, but I dinnae want ye to be uncomfortable.”

“I want to,” Isla said as she sat up slightly so that she could kiss him once more. Arran had been avoiding the question about it since he wasn’t sure that she would have been all right with it.

“I promise that I will be gentle,” he whispered with a slight smile on his face. The last thing that he wanted to do was hurt her during the process.

“Aye, I trust ye.”

Arran rid himself of the only remaining material that was hiding his body from her. He could barely hide his excitement at what they were going to do, but he was still incredibly cautious. Isla lay back and opened her legs to him as he crawled back on top of her, peppering kisses down her jaw and to her neck.

“I’m going to ask one more time,” he said. “Are ye sure that ye will be all right with this?”

“Aye, I’m sure,” she chuckled and smiled up at him. Her big, brown eyes were so warm and inviting.

Arran moved down so that he was positioned at her entrance, he was already hard enough and he knew that all he would need to do was push in. However, he didn’t want to hurt her, and so he pushed the tip in incredibly slowly.

Isla held onto his arm with one of her hands and squeezed tightly as she grit her teeth. He winced at the pain that flashed through her eyes, not wanting to cause it.

"I'm sorry, just tell me if ye would like to stop," he whispered in her ear and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Nay," she whispered. "Keep going."

Arran felt conflicted for a moment, but he honored her wish and continued to push into her. Isla closed her eyes for a moment and he felt her body tensing around him.

"Ye need to relax," he said while caressing one of her arms with his. "Just relax yer muscles."

Isla nodded slowly and was clearly trying to do what he said as she let her body relax slightly.

"There ye go," he muttered encouragingly while making sure that she was all right.

Soon enough, Arran was all the way in, but he still waited a moment until he could see the pain ebbing in her expression. Isla still gripped onto one of his arms, but her grip had weakened slightly. She finally opened her eyes and stared up at him.

Arran took this as his sign and started to pull out before slowly pushing back in, he could see the pain returning as he moved down to muffle the noises coming from her with his kisses. She groaned and clenched around him as he started to move a little faster, all the while hoping that the pain was subsiding for her.

"Does this feel all right?"

"Aye," she spoke in a breathless voice. "It's starting to feel good."

Her words were nothing but encouragement to him as he pushed in and out with a little more force than he had been using before. Isla suddenly held onto his shoulders as he felt her clench around him; the feeling was like nothing he had experienced before, and Arran knew that he wouldn't last long if she kept doing that.

"Ye feel so good," he grunted while pressing deeper into her.

"Arran," she moaned out his name in a long and drawn-out tone.

He continued with his fast pace until sweat was forming on his brow and Isla's legs were closed around his waist. Arran was grunting and groaning, but he realized that his thrusts were starting to become sloppier as he reached his end. He twitched inside of her only a few more times before he felt her quiver around him, Isla's moans reached a new pitch, and it was clear that he had pushed her over the edge.

Her moaning egged him on as he too reached his high. Arran let the feeling wash over him as he groaned and felt strands of his hair sticking to his wet brow. He stilled inside of her for a moment, letting the euphoria come in and out as though it were simply a process that he had to follow. He was breathing heavily, but so was Isla as he finally pulled out and lay down on the bed next to her.

"I love ye," he whispered, turning his head to see the way that she was panting by his side.

"I love ye too," she said, her voice slightly hoarse from exhaustion. He could see that her eyelids were struggling to remain open as she stared at him with a rather sleepy expression, her skin looking like pale milk in the candle's dying light. They remained in that still moment for only a few more minutes before sleep dragged them both down and into its depths.

Isla awoke the next morning feeling both sore but content. She had never quite experienced anything like the night before; to be in the arms of a man who loved her, to feel his body inside of hers in the most intimate way possible was just something that she never thought she would get to feel.

It still struck her how Arran would stare at her, as though she were the most beautiful woman in the world. He would stare like the people in the most remote villages who had never seen an outsider before.

The room felt rather stuffy that morning, but she was pleased to know that they would soon be on the road and away from the small inn. Isla had seen her fair share of inns over the last few days, but the more time that she spent within such a place, the more that she was starting to look forward to the idea of staying in a castle.

She left Arran to sleep in after being able to tell that he was clearly still worn out after the activities of the night before. She couldn't help but smile fondly at the way he looked so peaceful in his sleep. His dark hair flopped over his face, and he was breathing heavily. Isla kissed his cheek before leaving through the door and heading to the town's market.

She was used to wandering through the fruitful stalls and being heckled by the locals to buy from their produce, it put a smile on her face to see how friendly and welcoming the people were to her. However, she knew that without Arran at her side, she wouldn't be recognized as the future wife of the Laird, she was just a woman shopping for food in the morning.

Isla was interested in some of the vegetables that a greengrocer was

selling, but her aunt's words echoed into her mind.

"I was wondering if ye had heard anything about two people from Clan Baillie?" she asked the kind old man behind the stall stand. "Caitlyn and Oscar?"

"The names do ring a bell," the man said with a frown as he looked off into the distance. "Were they nae the Laird and Lady of the clan?"

Isla paused for a moment and thought about what the man was saying. Her aunt had never spoken of such a thing to her before. Isla remembered the hazy memories of her old life when her parents were still alive; she remembered the large house and running through the halls, but she had never made the connection to it that her parents were noble, or at least wealthy.

"Are ye sure?"

"They were the Laird and Lady, aye," the old man nodded with a little more confidence. "They disappeared some time ago though. I heard that they were murdered."

"Really?"

Isla had always prepared herself for the truth that her parents weren't alive. It had always been an incredibly thin chance that they were still out there. But hearing someone tell her that they had been murdered wasn't something that she had prepared herself for.

"Murdered by who?" she asked in a whisper.

The man sensed her distress and his eyes softened. "Are ye all right, lass? Did ye ken them?"

"Aye," she whispered. "But who was said to murder them?"

"The man who is the Laird of Clan Baillie now," the old man said. "His name escapes me, but he is said to have only reached his position through a sinful path."

Isla tried to think about who the Laird of the clan was now and why he would have done that.

“But if my parents were a Laird and a Lady... does that mean that I am...”

Isla stopped herself, realizing that she was speaking out loud to a man who was simply trying to sell his wares.

“Aye, it does, my lady,” he said with a slight wink. Isla chuckled at his response, thankful for the help that he had given to her. It felt like a lot of information to take in, but Isla wasn’t sure that she should share it yet with Arran since she didn’t know if the old man would be a reliable source.

She decided to go through the town and ask other people at the market if the information was correct. Isla was shocked to find that almost everyone she spoke to completely agreed with the old man.

Before returning to the inn, Isla stood on her own for a moment and tried to process what she had heard. It didn’t sit right with her that she had been lied to her entire life. Elsie had been protecting her, but she had protected her from things that Isla had had a right to know.

She ran a hand through her hair and sighed heavily while staring at the inn where she had stayed with Arran. Her memory of last night was cemented by the ache between her legs as she started back toward the inn, knowing that Arran would be getting concerned about where she had gone.

“Good morning,” Arran smiled at her as she entered the room. He was sitting at a lazy slant and stared from Isla to the bag of goods that she had purchased at the market. “Is everything all right?”

“Aye, everything is perfect.” Isla managed a smile on her face as she placed down the food and climbed back onto the bed to kiss him.

“Ye did nae have to go and get breakfast,” he said with a chuckle.

“I ken, but I just wanted to do something nice for ye.” Isla smiled down at him. The people’s comments from the town were still playing around in her mind, but she tried to push them to the back of her mind for the moment and ignore it. There was no point in worrying about something that she couldn’t do anything about at that moment.

“I think that we will reach the castle by tomorrow,” he said between

kisses.

“That’s exciting,” she smiled down at him.

“That means that we dinnae need to travel as far today, and that means that I can stay here in this bed with ye.”

Isla chuckled and felt his hands wrap around her body, pulling her even closer to his warm body.

“Tomorrow I am going to introduce ye to my family as the future Lady of Clan McCann,” he said with a wide smile.

“I cannae believe it,” she said, laughing in disbelief.

His hands were starting to wander down her body, but Isla quickly pulled him off with a smirk on her face. She wanted to eat the food that she had just brought from the market, especially after the energy that she had burned the night before.



Later that day, the two of them set off for the final town that they would stop at before the final push in the morning. Her stomach was alight with nerves as she thought about the path that lay ahead of her and all of the new experiences that she didn’t feel prepared for. She bit her lip as she thought about wandering around a castle, a vast building with more rooms than she could anticipate. There would be guards and servants and other noble men and women that she would have to introduce herself to.

Being on the road was a little cooler than it had been over the past few days, but Isla simply used that as an excuse to hold onto Arran and be even closer to him. She was already missing her aunt, but she knew that she couldn’t focus on the past when there was the much larger question of what had happened to her parents.

The afternoon’s ride gave her some time alone with her thoughts to mull over what had happened to them. The generally accepted truth was that they had been murdered, and while that was hard to hear, Isla knew that it was only the beginning. She was going to find out who did that to her parents, and she was going to get revenge.

Her hands were cold by the time that the last town rose up in the distance. The sun was already beginning to set and she could see the lights of torches glimmering from the large town.

“We’ll stay at one of the inns tonight, and then it will be a short journey tomorrow, how does that sound?”

“Aye.” Isla nodded to Arran’s words. “That sounds agreeable to me.”

They quickly rode into the town, one so big that barely anyone noticed that they were even there. Isla quite enjoyed the break in attention for a change, although she knew that once people got a better look at Arran, they would want to speak with him as they did in every other town.

“Are ye all right?” Arran asked as he helped her down from the horse.

“Aye,” Isla nodded quickly while frowning at him. “Why would I nae be?”

“Well, ye have been rather quiet for the entire ride. I just wanted to make sure that nothing was troubling ye.”

“Nay, nothing is troubling me.” Isla smiled up at him. She didn’t feel ready to admit the truth about her parents to him. She wanted to deal with one thing at a time, and the most pressing thing at that moment was going to be returning to the castle.

“All right, well ye can always tell me if something is,” he said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Thank ye, and I will,” she said, thinking of the right time to say such a thing to him. She was going to have to admit that her parents were a Laird and a Lady, but Isla had no training in being a noblewoman. She was also going to have to deal with the fact that they had been murdered and she wanted to know who was responsible for it. There was so much on her mind that she understood exactly why Arran had asked her if she was feeling all right.

The town was bustling with people, and it was clearly the largest that they had been to on their journey from the forest.

"I never asked ye," Isla spoke up as Arran turned to look at her. They had been following the main road in an attempt at finding an inn, but so far they had been unsuccessful. "What were ye doing so far from home?"

"I was just out and seeing the lands which I rule," Arran said with a slight shrug. "I ken that its nae that exciting, and I wish that I was able to say there was a better reason for me putting myself in that kind of danger, but there is nae."

"It's admirable that a Laird is so loved and appreciated by his people though," Isla pointed out with a smile.

"I suppose it is." Arran smiled as he continued to lead them along the busy road. They passed an inn that had no vacancies, but Isla was sure that if he needed to, Arran would be able to use his status to find them somewhere to stay.

The town was alive with such a bustle that it was starting to make Isla feel slightly disoriented. She narrowed her eyes and searched through the rows of houses, hoping that one of them would display the sign of an inn and be the answer to their worries. She knew that someone like Arran would be able to easily push on for the remainder of the afternoon, perhaps even until it got dark.

He would have been able to make that journey back to the castle and there would have been no issues. But she wasn't Arran. Isla was aching in places that she hadn't even known it would be possible for her to ache; her legs were tired from the constant riding, and her hands were sure to have calluses if she had to grip the reins of the horse for another day. She wasn't built for riding, and if she had to do such a journey again, it would still be too soon.

She winced with each movement of the horse and hoped that they would soon find a bed where she could lie for the night and let her body have a break from riding.

"How are ye doing?" Arran called to her.

"I'm tired," Isla admitted with a heavy sigh. Her eyes were feeling as though someone had put weights on her eyelids and relented with heaviness.

“Just a little further, they will have a room at the next inn for their Laird and his future wife,” she heard Arran say. It still warmed her to think that he wanted to marry her, but Isla was far too tired to properly appreciate what he was telling her.

“What if we cannae find anywhere?” she asked, trying not to sound too panicked.

“We will, and there is a long afternoon ahead of us, it’s nae as though we dinnae have time before it gets too dark,” Arran said in a rather reassuring tone. Isla had never met someone who was so good at staying positive, even when she was starting to lose hope.

They rode around for a while longer. The town just seemed to stretch on no matter how much ground they covered. Isla couldn’t imagine living in such a busy place. She was used to trees in the place of the houses that lined the roads; she wasn’t used to so many people congregating in one place.

It made her think of the castle that she would be moving into with Arran. It would be even more different to what she was used to, and Isla wasn’t sure if she was ready to face such change.

“Would ye say that the castle is a large place?” Isla asked as they rode side by side. Arran had to nod and wave every now and again when someone from the town recognized who he was.

“Aye, it’s a large and impressive structure. It has stood above our land for hundreds of years, and I hope that it will stand for hundreds more. I think there are still passages and rooms that I have nae been able to explore yet.”

“It’s that big!” Isla’s eyes widened. Her imagination was failing her as she tried to picture what such a place would look like.

“Aye, it’s my forest.” Arran smiled fondly as he spoke of his home. “I’m sure that there are areas of the forest that ye never got to explore. Of course, the forest is yer home, and it will always be familiar, but I doubt that ye have seen it all.”

The castle sounded a lot less daunting as he compared it to her home. Isla realized that was all it was to him, that was all a boy growing up to become a Laird would ever know.

“Aye, but ye cannae pick herbs in a castle,” Isla said out loud.

“That is very true,” Arran said with a chuckle. “But we do have gardens where we grow herbs, and I’m sure that ye will be able to pick them from there.”

Isla liked the sentiment of his offer, but it wasn’t the same as actually being able to go out into the forest and pick the wild plants that she was so familiar with.

Finally, Isla caught sight of an inn that they had yet to try. Her hopes weren’t diminished and she was sure that there would be room for them. She had made the decision that they should go in with the strategy of telling the innkeeper who they were, or at least letting the innkeeper work it out for themselves. She was sure that nobody would knowingly turn away their own Laird from their establishment.

“Here we go,” Arran said with a smile on his face.

They were both quick to dismount their horse as they approached the inn. It was already looking promising to Isla since the inn wasn’t nearly as busy-looking as the others had been.

“I only need one room,” she could hear Arran talking to one of the stable hands that had quickly jumped forward to help them. “Thank ye,” he said in response to whatever the stable hand had said. Isla had just been out of earshot as she held onto the reins of her horse, wincing at having to walk around on her tired legs.

“Do they have space?” she asked as her eyes met with his.

“Aye,” he nodded slowly. “They do.”

Isla let her eyes close for a moment, relief flooded through her in such an extreme way that she could have just let it consume her. Her legs felt weak, but she held herself up, knowing that the comfort of a room to themselves would soon be available to her.

“**T**his is more like it,” Arran said with a smile as they stepped into the large room. The innkeeper had made the connection of who they were and why they were traveling. It sounded as though many people in the land had been concerned for the whereabouts of their Laird.

“This already feels like so much,” Isla remarked as she stared around the master room of the inn.

A large four poster bed was clearly the centerpiece of the room. The windows overlooked the quiet courtyard to the rear of the building as opposed to the bustling street at the front. She noticed that the wooden floor was kept in much better condition than the previous places that they had stayed at, but she was still so shocked about the size of the bed.

She wouldn’t say that either of them were on the large side, but the bed before them appeared as though it could easily accommodate another Isla and Arran without any issue of space.

“Nay, ye should see my chambers,” Arran boasted. “I have some of the finest materials for my blankets and curtains. I have rugs that have been sent from far off lands, and things that I’ve never even used.”

“Do ye nae think that it all sounds rather... unnecessary?” Isla asked as she moved forward and sat on the plush bed. It was much higher up than she was used to, and her feet weren’t able to touch the floor as she sat down.

“It’s necessary for a Laird,” Arran said with a shrug. “It’s amusing though; there had once been a time when I had thought that I would never be able to live without those... things. Things that I thought

were important; gold plates and fine silks, things that made me look important. But coming out to the forest, living with ye and yer aunt showed me a way of life that was much more simple than anything that I have ever been used to.”

“Do you think that’s a bad thing?” Isla asked hesitantly. She didn’t like feeling that she wasn’t enough for him. She had been brought up with humble values, not the usual upbringing for the supposed daughter of a Laird and Lady.

She had yet to tell him about her discovery, but she wanted to get the facts right first.

“I think it’s an interesting and new way of living that I have never thought of before,” Arran said while lying down on one side of the bed. Isla felt the plump mattress bounce beneath the shift in weight, but she didn’t turn to face him. “I liked how simple everything was, how in touch with the land around ye it was.”

“But castle life will be different,” Isla said, feeling as though she was finishing the sentence for him.

“Aye, I will nae lie to ye and say that it will be anything like what ye have gone through in this life. But I hope that ye will be able to accept the changes in the same way that I did when ye rescued me,” Arran said. She felt his hand touching her arm in a reassuring gesture.

“Aye, I hope that it will be easy for me to transition to such a way of life,” she said, nodding.

She let herself lie back while thinking about the many things that were on her mind. Isla still couldn’t believe what she had learned in the previous town; her parents were noble, they had been leaders, and something bad had happened to them.

It felt like an enormous burden to be bearing, but she knew that it was one that she had to get more information on before anticipating what to do next. Arran was lying next to her, but he was silent.

It was clear that they were both tired. Isla could feel her eyes growing heavy as she stared up at the ceiling. A large part of her wanted to just go to sleep, but she knew that it was far too early in the evening.

"I'm going out to the market," Arran announced, sitting up. "Do ye want to come?"

"Nay, I think that I will stay here," Isla said with a shrug.

She knew that while she couldn't go to sleep, her legs were also not going to allow her to walk through the town without experiencing any discomfort.

"All right, I will be back soon." Arran nodded to her as he walked over to where she lay on the large bed.

Isla couldn't help the smile that crossed her face as he leaned down and kissed her. She could feel her stomach fluttering at the contact between them, as though it were the first time that their lips were coming into contact with one another. Her cheeks heated as she thought of the things that she wanted to do when he came back to bed with her, but Isla moved back as he straightened up and headed for the door.

She wished that they could just stay in their small world forever, traveling from inn to inn, living life together and without any interruptions. It was the kind of dream that she would have once laughed at herself for believing in, but Isla was in love, and that was the kind of mindset that had settled in.

She lay on the bed for a little while longer, thinking about how much her life had changed over the last few weeks. She started to reflect on what her life would have been like if she had never found Arran by the stream. She would still be living at the cottage and her life would still be rather small. Isla wondered if she would have married Lachlan simply because he was the only other person who was so accepting of her lifestyle.

She started to wonder if her aunt would even let her stay in the cottage as she grew older. Isla came to the decision that it had been her time to leave, she was outgrowing that life, and a whole new life was awaiting her when they would arrive at Arran's castle.

She sat up with a slightly lazy smile on her face, things were finally looking as though they would be all right. However, her smile faltered as she thought about the one thing that was still uncertain in her life: the fate of her parents.

After a while, Isla realized that she could use the time a little better, and so she left the room and went to explore the inn.

“Can I help ye?” the innkeeper’s wife asked as Isla walked over to her. The building creaked and groaned with each person that walked around it, and Isla was sure that many men had hit their heads on the low-hanging beams.

“Aye, I was wondering if I would be able to ask ye something about the previous Laird and Lady of Baillie Clan?” Isla said while walking over to the counter.

The innkeeper’s wife was rather plump and red in the face. She looked as though the constant work on her feet and the stress of running such a place had caused her body to swell.

“Aye, I’ve heard of them,” she nodded.

She wasn’t the friendliest person that Isla had asked, and she was already starting to regret approaching her.

“I was wondering if ye knew anything about what happened to them?”

The woman narrowed her beady eyes until they were nothing more than dark dots. She was clearly trying to work out why Isla was asking such questions.

“There was a story circulating through the taverns around here quite a while ago,” she recalled. “I think they said that the Laird and Lady were murdered, but I will nae lie when I say that I was nae listening too much.”

It was the same story again. People were familiar with it; people had spoken over ale and simply resumed their lives after talking on the subject. Isla felt a heavy pit in her gut as she tried to imagine the fate of her parents simply becoming a story that was told in passing.

It didn’t feel fair to her that this was what had become of them. Her aunt hadn’t given her the full story, and Isla wished more than anything that she could return to the forest to ask Elsie more questions.

“Are ye all right, lass?” the innkeeper’s wife’s voice jolted her from her thoughts.

“Aye, sorry, thank ye for talking to me,” Isla muttered as she moved on toward the door of the inn.

She couldn’t face going back to lie on her bed for another few hours, and so she quickly decided that she would at least get some fresh air while the afternoon was still light. Isla wandered down to the stables that stood beside the inn. They were quaint, but she wanted to check on the horses.

The two animals, despite the discomfort, had served them both very well on their journey so far. Isla’s expression softened as she made her way over to the horses, stroking up one of their noses and hoping that the animals were able to detect that she meant no harm to them. Her aunt had once told her that animals like horses were always able to know if you were scared; they could sense it in the air around them and it would make them dangerous to be around.

She took a deep breath in and released a shaky breath, her mind whirling with ideas and thoughts that made it hard to think straight.

“Ye boys are hungry?” Isla whispered to the two horses, conscious to keep her voice low in case a stable hand caught her. She could already imagine the stories that would be conjured up about the Laird’s future wife and how she talks to animals. “All right, ye can have a carrot each, but dinnae tell the stable hand that I gave ye one.”

As Isla spoke, she wandered over to where the treats were kept for the animals, taking out two carrots before returning to the horses. It felt like the least that she could do since they had been riding tirelessly day after day.

“Ye always were good with animals.” A voice spoke from the shadows, causing Isla to jump back with wide eyes.

“Who’s there?” she asked, wincing at the way that her voice shook.

“I should be offended that ye dinnae recognize me. I thought that I was yer oldest friend,” Lachlan said as he stepped out of the shadows.

Isla had to blink a few times to properly believe that he was there and

standing in front of her. Lachlan had been back home, he never left the forest, and he would never venture so far. Her heart dropped as she thought about the last time that she saw him, how he had shouted at her and told her to leave him.

“What are ye doing here, Lachlan?” Isla asked in disbelief.

“I’ve come to see ye,” he said with a rather nonchalant shrug. To his left, Isla could tell that the horses were sensing the unease of the situation.

“I thought that ye never wanted to see me again, I thought that ye were too hurt...”

“Aye, I was,” he said, taking a daring step closer. His skin was as milky as a harvest moon, and there were dark circles that framed his eyes. A scar ran down one side of his face, and Isla knew exactly who had caused such a wound. “But I wanted to come and see ye, I wanted to give ye one more chance to think about it.”

“Think about being with ye?” Isla couldn’t believe what was happening.

“Aye, but now that I’m standing here and ye are looking at me like a monster, I’m starting to think that ye were never going to reconsider as I had hoped.”

Isla felt frozen to the spot with fear. Straw prickled around her ankles, jabbing her slightly but it felt like the least of her concerns.

“Ye should go before Arran gets back,” she said, wincing at the way that his face twitched at the mention of Arran.

“He does nae seem to be near,” Lachlan responded with a growing smirk on his face. “He does nae seem to be near at all. I’m nae sure that ye can depend on yer Arran right now. I think that he’s left ye completely at my mercy.”

“Lachlan, I cannae be with ye. I love him,” she said, standing her ground. Isla knew that nothing was intimidating about her, but she had to at least appear as though she was brave.

“It should have been me!” Lachlan growled in response. His fists were clenched, but it was the sheathed dagger at his hip that Isla was trying not to focus on too much. She had no weapon, and she didn’t know how to fight with her hands.

“I’m sorry, but ye have always been my best friend,” Isla tried to speak in a softer voice. “My heart lies with another, and I’m sorry that it could nae have been ye in this life.”

“Friends,” he spat as his eyes lit up in fury.

“Lachlan, this is nae the man that I have known for my whole life. Ye are someone different now and I really dinnae like it at all. What happened to the boy that lived in the forest with me? What happened to the Lachlan that I have known for so long?”

Lachlan shook his head and turned away for a moment. Isla waited, her chest rising and falling rapidly, as he stood with his back to her.

Suddenly, he straightened, as though a sense of clarity had overwhelmed him. Isla only realized that she was holding her breath when her lungs started to ache.

“If ye will nae be mine,” Lachlan said, turning back to face her. “Then I will ruin ye so that ye will be nobody’s.”

Isla felt her throat becoming dry at his words, she tried to swallow, but it felt as though her throat had closed up. She tried to take a step back, but Lachlan was much quicker at moving than she was.

“Lachlan, please!” she cried out as he gripped her arm with one of his strong hands. Isla winced at the contact, knowing that it was likely to leave bruises. “Help!” she screamed. “Please! Someone, he-”

Lachlan’s other hand quickly came over her mouth, muffling her cries as she tried to struggle out of his grip. Isla’s heart hammered in her chest as she felt him using his weight on top of her to hold her down. His legs pinned her as the horses startled to become unsettled by her cries. She felt her body freezing up at the feeling of the hand that had been gripping her arm moving down to pull up her skirts. She knew exactly what he was planning to do to her, and she thought that she might vomit.

Isla knew that she had to think quickly, and so she let his hand around her mouth relax for a moment before she bit into the skin.

Lachlan howled in pain, recoiling his hand for a minute, Isla used the distraction to start scrambling out from under him. The coarse floor of straw dug into her skin as she moved, but Isla didn't care, all she was focused on was getting away from Lachlan.

"Ye are a monster!" she said, shoving him.

Lachlan managed to quickly get back onto his feet before turning to glare at her. Isla didn't waste a second as she broke out of the stable and quickly made her way down the road.

"Get back here, Isla!"

Colton was weary from his travels as he approached the inn. The day was almost done and he looked forward to the promise of being home the next day. He had ridden for more hours of the day than he had slept, but he was gaining on his brother and the girl that he'd taken with her, Colton was sure of it.

There was still no news in the towns that the Laird had made it home, but people had seen him, and all Colton had to do was follow the trail of rumors back to the castle. He had made peace with the idea that he would simply have to meet up with his brother back home as opposed to out on the road.

Part of Colton had wanted to ride through the night and simply get home a lot quicker, but he was far too weary, and the road was dangerous at night. He knew that he would need to have his senses about him and be sharp in case he was suddenly under attack.

He pushed his dark hair away from his clammy brow, the ride had been a mixture of sweat and cool breeze, a contrasting combination that was enough to send a man mad.

"Ah," he smiled as the stablehand approached him. "I'm looking for a room for the evening, tell yer innkeeper that the brother of Laird Arran demands somewhere to stay."

The boy's eyes widened for a moment as he realized who he was talking to before he quickly nodded his head and scurried back inside. Colton stood a little straighter as he waited for the boy to return, hoping that the rain would at least hold off until he was securely inside of the inn.

The horse by his side was clearly in need of a break too, only

reassuring Colton further that he had made the right decision. He tried not to think about what his fate might have been that evening if he had ridden past the town and on toward the castle. He sighed heavily, knowing that he would be going home empty handed, but at least there were many reports of people seeing Arran alive.

He couldn't help but think of his mother and sister back at the castle; he willed the information that had been spoken in the towns to spread like wildfire so that they would soon learn that Arran was alive. He couldn't bear to think of them mourning someone who wasn't dead.

"Good afternoon, sir," the innkeeper said, rushing out to greet Colton, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Ye have a room for me?" Colton asked in a cheery voice.

"We do, sir," the innkeeper said, but Colton could sense the hesitation in his voice. "Unfortunately, it's nae our finest room, for that is already taken."

Colton sniffed as he stood up a little straighter. He wasn't used to being told no or that he wasn't going to get the best. He was a nobleman, he lived in his comforts within the castle, but he wasn't accustomed to such talk.

"I'm willing to pay double the rate," he said with a mere shrug. "Whoever is in the room will be paid for the trouble of moving."

Colton thought of the uncomfortable bed that was sure to greet him if he didn't make enough of a stand against the innkeeper. He wasn't going to settle for just any room, especially when he was so weary from his travels, he felt that he deserved this.

"Aye, and on any other day, I would take yer offer and let ye have the best room," the innkeeper said, shifting from one foot to the other. "But the person in the room is the Laird... yer brother, sir."

Colton's eyes widened and his heart leaped in his chest. He couldn't believe that at long last, he had managed to catch up to his brother.

"Arran's here?" Colton said, staring between the innkeeper and the stablehand.

“Aye, and he’s-”

“Get back here, Isla!”

Their conversation was quickly cut off by the sound of commotion and shouting. Within an instant, Colton’s hand was reaching to unsheathe his sword. He knew that name. Isla. The woman in the forest had spoken about her niece with the same name. If this was the inn where they were staying, then it sounded as though she had gotten herself into some kind of trouble.

Colton charged around the corner to where the stables of the inn were, his eyes widened at the sight of a woman running straight at him.

“Isla!” he called to her as she tried to get past him. Her eyes were wide with fright, but confusion quickly took hold of her expression. “I’m Arran’s brother, stand behind me and I will help ye.”

“Oh, thank ye!” she breathed out, appearing as though she may collapse.

“Isla, get back here!” a tall and rather skinny man emerged from the stables. The expression on his face was like thunder, but his eyes burned with an anger that Colton knew he would soon receive the brunt of.

“Stop this,” Colton said, taking a step forward.

“Get out of my way,” the man snarled, but Colton had no choice other than to raise his sword. He stepped closer, threatening to swing the weapon at any moment. Though the man had appeared mad in his anger, there was no fear in his face as the sword glinted before him.

“Stop this now, or ye will be arrested,” Colton threatened once more as the man dared to shove him.

Colton quickly pushed Isla further out of the way before kicking the man with much more force. He watched as the man was sent sprawling by the force, he fell down onto the floor, winded by the sudden jolt. Colton was quick to advance once more, placing his boot against the man’s ribs and applying pressure.

“Ye are really the kind of man who preys on an innocent woman?” Colton asked while shaking his head. “It is men like ye who disgust me.”

The man looked completely terrified, his eyes were wide, and his skin was a sickly pale color. Colton held his sword up, as though he was ready to strike it down and end the man’s life. However, he knew that his brother had won over so much of the land through his kindness, and he wouldn’t take too well to learn that Colton had gone around undoing this with violence.

He glanced back at Isla for a moment, but her eyes were fixated on the man before him.

“I am placing ye under arrest,” Colton said finally while quickly taking the chains that he brought with him for protection. He used them to bind the man’s hands and drag him to his feet. “It would do ye good to nae resist.”

The man was like dead weight as Colton hauled him in a better position, his head hung forward as he stopped struggling and seemed to accept his fate.

“Do ye have somewhere that this man can be securely kept?” Colton called to the innkeeper.

“Aye, the jailhouse is only a few doors down. I’m sure that he can stay there for the night,” the innkeeper said, nodding. Colton then turned his attention to the beautiful woman who was smoothing down her skirt.

“Did he hurt ye, my lady?”

Isla’s eyes met his, and instantly Colton could understand why his brother had found the woman attractive.

“Nay, he almost did,” Isla spoke in a rather small voice. “I ken him, he was a friend once.”

Colton looked from the slumped man to herself and couldn’t help wondering what kind of past they shared.

“He will trouble ye nay more, my lady,” he said, nodding and beginning to lead the man to the local jailhouse.



By the time that Colton returned, he felt as though he deserved the room even more. However, he knew that there would be no arguing with his brother and he didn't want to take the room from Isla.

She also had the dazed expression of someone who was exhausted from traveling, and he was sure that after the commotion of the afternoon, she would need the room more.

“Are ye sure that ye are all right, my lady?” Colton asked as he walked over to her.

“Aye, I'm just waiting for Arran,” she said, clearly trying to act nonchalant.

“All right, I will wait with ye for my brother's return if it's nay bother to ye?”

Isla nodded as she sat down outside of the inn.

“He was one of the only people from my past that I thought I could trust. He has always been a friend to me, but what he was... trying to do before ye got involved was just awful,” Isla said, staring down at her hands in her lap.

He could tell that she was holding it in. Whatever hurt and emotion that she wanted to let out, she was avoiding it by keeping her head down.

“Ye are the one who saved Arran's life?” he asked her, trying to make the conversation a lot more positive.

“Aye, well, I found him by the river and brought him to our cottage,” Isla said, turning to frown at him in confusion. “How did ye ken?”

“I found yer aunt, she told me everything. I was just about to give up hope of looking for my brother when I was told to find yer aunt's cottage in the forest,” Colton explained. “She told me how ye cared for

him, even when he was just a man, nae a Laird. Ye have a kindness in ye that many would envy.”

He caught the small smile that gave way across her lips, Isla’s cheeks heated for a moment, forcing her to look away.

“I did what anyone would do.” She tried to shrug it off. “I found an injured man and I took care of him, I’m sure that there are many other people in the world who would have done the same.”

“Aye, but there are also many other people who would nae have taken on the burden, and so ye are one of the good ones,” Colton said, flashing her a smile. “My family thought my brother was dead, it’s only because of ye that he is nae. We have a great debt to repay ye.”

“Ye dinnae have to repay anything, and ye have just saved my life. I think we can say that we’re even now,” Isla said with a slight chuckle.

“The people that I asked about my brother said that he has been saying ye will be his wife?”

“Aye,” Isla couldn’t help but smile a little wider now. “He told me only a few days ago.”

“I ken that everything will be strange for ye. Where ye have come from and where ye are going are going to be very different things,” Colton said with a slight warning.

“Aye, I ken,” Isla agreed. “I have already thought about this, and it will be a change that I’m willing to make for Arran. I’m sure that in time, I will start to fit in.”

“Ye will make a good wife for Arran. I can already see it.”

They spoke for a while longer; Colton enjoyed her stories of forests and herbs. Even Isla could admit that her aunt was rather peculiar, however, it was admirable that two women had been able to make a living from using herbs to heal people. Colton was impressed by the life that she had lived so far, and he was sure that Arran would have been similarly as impressed when he found out.

“And that man,” Colton said after a while. He was hoping that some of

the intensity of the situation had died down and Isla would be able to give him more details of what happened. "He is from yer past? But how did he end up in this town too?"

"I suppose that he has been following Arran and I," Isla said with a slight sigh. "Lachlan did nae take too kindly to the fact that Arran and I were starting to develop feelings for one another."

"Was he jealous?" Colton asked with narrowed eyes.

"Aye, he was," Isla said. "He told me only after he caught Arran and I kissing in the forest, but he was very angry. He tried to fight Arran, and then he shouted at me. I wish that he would have handled it another way, but this is too far."

"He will pay for his crimes," Colton nodded.

"I just fear for my aunt, because Lachlan would help me to gather the things that she needed. He would go into the town a lot more than she ever would, and now he's gone too."

Colton thought about how different their way of life was, he couldn't imagine ever having to gather his own materials to cook and treat people with.

"Ye will be free to go and visit her whenever ye want," Colton offered.

"Aye, but it's nae the same as always being there when she needs me."

"She understands perfectly that yer place is here," Colton said. "When I spoke to her, she was so proud of ye, and she wanted ye to succeed with my brother. She told me that she's happy for ye."

He could see the effect that his words had on her expression. Colton hoped that he was able to at least ease some of her worries.

"I came as quickly as I could! I heard about... Colton?" Arran stopped as soon as his eyes landed on the pair before him.

Colton couldn't help but break out into a wide smile. His brother really was alive. He wasn't sure why it was only hitting him now that

he was before him, but Colton couldn't even begin to express his happiness.

"I'm so glad that ye are all right," he said, rushing over to greet his brother.

"Ye came to look for me?" Arran asked in surprise.

"Aye, of course, I did, I could nae just accept that ye were dead," he said while laughing. "It seems like such a silly thought now."

"How is Mother? What about Keira? Are they all right?" Arran asked, moving over to Isla.

"Aye, they will be fine when they learn that ye are alive. Men have been sniffing around the castle, trying to lay their claim to the Lairdship."

"I knew that would be the case." Arran spoke grimly.

Colton watched as his older brother turned to Isla, holding her delicately as though she were a dainty flower that he had picked.

"Are ye all right?"

"I'm fine," Isla said, trying to brush it off. "Yer brother stopped anything from happening, and Lachlan is locked up."

"I should have never left ye on yer own. I'm sorry," Arran said.

It was typical of his older brother to try and blame himself for something that he would have no control over regardless.

"Ye could nae have known that Lachlan was following us," Isla said, shaking her head. "It's nae yer fault."

"I swear I will kill him," Arran seethed as Colton stepped forward.

"He's under arrest and so he will have to go through the normal process before ye get a chance to do that I'm afraid, Brother," he said with a slight smile. It was just like things used to be, when Arran was feeling impulsive, Colton would be there to ground him.

“Aye, he’s nae a threat to ye anymore,” Arran said, pressing a kiss to Isla’s forehead. “That’s all that matters.”

“I hear ye took the best room at the inn, Brother?” Colton said with an amused smirk to try and lighten the mood.

“Aye, it’s for us,” Arran fired back quickly. Colton could see the amusement growing on his brother’s face too.

“Ye win this time,” he said, holding up his hands and sighing heavily.

“All right, well I think Isla needs some rest, it’s been a very long and... eventful day,” Arran said, staring at her.

“I will see ye for some dinner later perhaps?” Colton asked as they started inside.

“Aye, of course.” Arran smiled fondly at his brother as they moved to climb the stairs up to the rooms. Colton had to find the innkeeper once more, knowing that a much less comfortable room awaited him.

“Are ye sure ye are all right?” Arran said as soon as the door closed behind them. He quickly pulled her into his arms and held her tightly to his chest. Isla felt so small within his arms, but he held on, uncaring if she was able to hear the pounding of his heart against his ribs.

Arran had managed to remain calm while reuniting with his brother. It had been a good moment, but he felt as though his concern for Isla had overshadowed his joy at seeing his brother once more.

“I’m fine,” Isla brushed it off while trying to wriggle away from him. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Ye are nae fine, Isla, ye are crying,” Arran said as he let her go. Isla quickly wiped her eyes before moving over to the large bed.

Arran never wanted to let her out of his sight again, yet he knew that they had been right when they’d said that there was no way he could have stopped this.

“I’m so sorry that I was nae there to protect ye,” he said, wincing at having to say those words in the first place.

“It’s nae yer fault, this is the fault of a man who I should have told years ago that I was nae in love with him,” Isla said, resting her face against the plush pillows.

“I’m just so glad that Colton was there to protect ye.”

“Aye, he saved me,” Isla nodded.

Arran let his arm fall lazily to her waist as he lay down next to her, tracing soothing circles across her lower stomach.

“I will make him pay for this,” Arran said as his thoughts turned back to Lachlan. He had known it wouldn’t be the last time that they would see him in the forest, but he hadn’t anticipated an attack like this.

“I just dinnae understand how much he’s changed,” Isla sighed and sniffled.

“He was in love,” Arran said simply. “Men are known for their foolishness when in love. It makes it difficult to blame him, but what he has done today is unforgivable.”

He could feel Isla moving against him, bringing their bodies even closer to one another. Arran smiled and pulled her into him, vowing to himself that he would never let her go so easily again.



Arran waited for Isla to fall asleep before shifting off the bed. His eyes were dark and clouded with revenge; there was an anger inside of him that he couldn’t settle. He wouldn’t rest until that anger went away.

The light outside was fading, and the evening was drawing in, but Arran had no appetite for food or sleep. He quickly kept his head down and ducked out of the inn, making sure that nobody would recognize him in his hood.

His fists were clenched as he walked quickly down the road, not wanting Isla to wake and see that he wasn’t at her side yet again. However, he had to do this; he had to go and see Lachlan.

He waited outside until two men exited the jailhouse. The last thing that he wanted was anyone spreading rumors about the Laird going to visit prisoners.

He knew that he was risking a lot by going, and Arran wasn’t sure if he would be able to control his own temper if Lachlan started speaking to him about what happened.

“I need to see the prisoner who came in here today,” Arran said to the

man at the front of the jail house.

He could feel the scrutinizing gaze on him, but Arran said no more than he needed to. He knew that it was likely that he would have to reveal himself to the man if he was going to get past.

“I cannae do that, he’s to be taken away in the morning,” the man said, shaking his head. Arran was at least pleased to see that the security was vigilant for Lachlan.

“I am Laird Arran, and I demand to see him,” Arran said, lifting his head to look at the man before him.

He was used to the sudden and rather stunned look of fear that crossed the man’s features, but Arran made sure to keep his face calm.

“Aye, my Laird, at once,” the man quickly muttered as his fingers fumbled for the keys.

“It would also be good for ye to nae repeat that I was here this eve,” Arran added as he followed the man through the cold rows of cells.

“Aye, of course, my Laird, of course,” the man said, turning around to make sure that Arran was still following him.

Arran still kept his head down in the darkness, not wanting to draw the attention of any other prisoners in the block. He hated places like that. It was perhaps the part of his job that he hated the most.

He had always been fair and just, but it was men like Lachlan who made his job hard. He didn’t want to sentence people or have people banished from the land, he only wanted peace. But sometimes it took those kind of judgments to create peace.

“Here he is,” the man said, gesturing to one of the only occupied cells.

“Thank ye,” Arran said.

He had been in half a mind to ask the man to unlock the cell; however, he knew that it would be best to keep the bars between them. The man bowed his head and walked off back down to the front of the jailhouse.

"I thought ye would come to see me when ye found out." Lachlan's voice was rather coarse sounding, as though he hadn't had water for days.

"Why did ye come?"

"I could nae just let the two of ye go," Lachlan said, his shadowy form beginning to emerge from the back of the cell. Arran was having to squint to see him.

"Ye were going to hurt her. I thought that ye loved her," Arran said. There was no warmth in his voice, only conviction. He liked the authoritative way that his voice bounced off the walls, silencing any pleas for mercy before they came.

"I could nae let her be with ye. I thought that if she does nae want me, then I would nae let her be with anyone," Lachlan said, approaching the bars.

There were new bruises on his face other than the scar from where Arran had struck him in the forest. His pale hands wrapped around the bars, as though he needed the support to hold himself up.

"Ye were willing to hurt her, so ye cannae have ever loved her properly," Arran said with narrowed eyes. "I will nae let ye get away with it."

"Does it look like I'm getting away?" Lachlan asked with a scoff as he shook his head. He was silent for a while before his dark eyes settled on Arran's once more. "Is she all right?"

"She's shaken. No thanks to you," Arran didn't hold back the bitter tone of his voice. "Dinnae pretend to care after it was yer doing in the first place."

"I do care about her still," Lachlan snapped back. "I just could nae bear the idea of ye and her together, she does nae deserve a man like ye."

"I can give her a good life," Arran fired back at him. "Much better than any life that ye would have given her."

Lachlan turned away and shook his head, his hands still hung onto the bars as though they were all he had to help him stay upright. Arran couldn't help himself, he used the moment of weakness to reach between the bars and grab ahold of Lachlan by his thin neck.

Lachlan let out a noise of surprise, trying in vain to pull away from the grip that Arran held. He knew that he would be much stronger than Lachlan, but the man was still putting up a fight.

"Please," he grunted, his pale skin finally blooming with a blotchy, red hue.

"Ye will never see her again once ye leave here," Arran said in a tone that he hadn't heard himself use before. "Ye will be taken to the castle and tried for attempting to rape her, but ye will never see her again. And if I ever see ye again..." Arran let his words trail off as he chuckled darkly for a moment. "Ye had better run."

Lachlan's eyes were wide and bulging as his hands worked to try and pry Arran's grip off of him. However, his attempts were continuously in vain. He was making noises of distress, but there was nobody to save a criminal like him. Arran let go just as Lachlan was starting to feel a lot heavier in his grip.

He let his hand release his neck, watching as Lachlan fell back onto the stone floor with a thud. The man imprisoned behind bars winced and curled up into a ball like an insect that had no other way to protect itself. Arran glared down at him, knowing that his words would suffice for the time being.

"Lachlan, I hope this is the last time that we ever speak," Arran said as he thought about the fact that this was a man who had once helped Isla save him from the side of the stream.

"Ye said a castle. I will nae be tried here?" Lachlan asked. His voice was hoarse, but he was clearly trying to will the words out of his mouth.

"Aye, ye will be tried at my castle," Arran said, standing up a little straighter.

Even in the darkness of the jailhouse, he could see the confusion cross over Lachlan's already rather pained expression.

“Yer castle?” He echoed his words as though it would help to unravel their meaning.

“Laird Arran,” the man, who had been the guard at the jailhouse, was approaching him once more. However, Arran kept his gaze on Lachlan's, watching the truth unravel like a piece of rope that had been tangled for a long time.

“Ye are a Laird...”

“Have ye finished, my Laird?” the man asked, standing back to give Arran some room.

“Aye, I’ve said my piece,” Arran said, nodding his head. “I appreciate yer discretion,” Arran said to the man as he led him back to the entrance of the jail house.

Arran felt content that Lachlan wouldn’t be bothering either him or Isla ever again.



“Where have ye been?” Colton asked as he sat outside of the inn and polished his sword.

“I was at the jailhouse,” Arran said, sitting down beside his brother.

He’d missed getting to speak to Colton in the way that they used to; Colton was like his second in command; he was the right-hand man that Arran could always depend on and never had to doubt or question his loyalty.

“Ye spoke with the boy?” Colton asked, turning to his brother.

“Aye, Lachlan will nae be bothering Isla any time soon,” Arran said while staring down at his hand. His wrist ached a little from having to hold Lachlan up by his throat, but it was nothing in the grand scheme of things.

“I’m sure that ye scared him good,” Colton said, laughing and shaking his head.

"I've nae been that angry for a very long time," Arran sighed. "I let him get too close to Isla. I dinnae ken what I was thinking."

"Ye cannae blame yerself for this, there was no way that ye would have known this was going to happen."

Arran pondered over his brother's words; he didn't like how it felt as though he needed reassuring. He was normally strong and self-assured enough to not need such talk.

"He did nae ken that I was the Laird," Arran managed a chuckle as he spoke. "Ye should have seen the way that his face went white as I told him."

"Oh, I can imagine," Colton laughed. "He has a whole trial ahead of him that he hadn't been expecting then."

"Aye, and I will nae show him mercy," Arran said, clenching his fists.

"We have nae spoken about Isla," Colton prompted, smiling in a rather coy way.

Arran knew what his brother was getting at, and he quickly rolled his eyes at his way of changing the subject.

"What about her?"

"Ye are in love. The last time that I saw ye, there was nobody in this entire country that ye wanted to marry. Now ye are determined to lock up anyone who wrongs one lady," Colton said with an amused smirk on his face.

"I care about her," Arran said with a shrug. "And I want her to be all right."

"Aye, I could see that," Colton said.

"She did nae have to save me in the woods, and she sat by my bedside and waited long nights for me to wake up. That is the kind of person who has a heart as sweet as honeysuckle, her soul is so kind that I figured she could help me to continue being a good Laird. I suppose that it does also help that she is the most beautiful woman that I have

ever seen.”

Colton was laughing at Arran’s words, but Arran didn’t care for his brother’s judgement. He was in love, and he wasn’t going to let anyone else tell him how to feel.

“And to think that she had been hiding out in the forest her whole life,” Colton added with a chuckle.

“In a way, I’m kind of glad. It meant that it was me who found her and nae someone else,” Arran said, also managing a chuckle. His heart was still beating rather quickly after his encounter with Lachlan, but he was slowly starting to calm down.

“I’ve missed ye, Brother,” Colton said with a light smile on his face.

“I’ve missed ye too,” Arran said, returning the warmth in his smile. “Do ye ken that I lost my memory?”

“Aye, Isla’s aunt was telling me. She was the one who directed me back the way that I had come, otherwise I would nae have ever found out that ye were still alive.”

“They are good people, she and her aunt,” Arran nodded, pursing his lips. “I just cannae believe that hitting my head made me forget everything about myself.”

“And ye have nay idea who attacked ye?” Colton looked tense by his own question.

“Nay, they were hooded, but I could tell from their build that it was a man. It must have been a man, there is nay way that a woman would have ridden like that,” Arran said.

Those were the thoughts that had been circulating around in his mind ever since he remembered who he was and how he came to be in Isla’s care.

“It’s strange, it was deliberate,” Colton stated.

“Aye, and someone will pay, but we need to understand the facts. I’m hoping that just like when I remembered myself, I will somehow start

to remember more about that day in time,” Arran said, trying to focus on that day in an attempt to speed up the process.

“It’s nay use forcing something like that,” Colton said.

“Look at ye,” Arran said with a chuckle. “Ye spend a few moments with a healer and now ye are sounding all-knowing.”

“Ye are the one who wants to marry a healer,” Colton fired back while laughing.

“Aye, and I have never felt this way about a woman before,” Arran said with pride. He sat up a little straighter and thought about the sleeping woman upstairs that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

“I’ve never seen ye like this,” Colton remarked. “Ye look so... happy.”

Arran couldn’t help but let the smile on his face grow at his brother’s comments. He did feel happy, happier than he had ever been. His father’s death had marred much of the time between him growing from a boy into a man. He had grown up quickly and had been robbed of many feelings of happiness. Arran felt as though he deserved this.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” Colton said, looking over Arran’s shoulder.

Arran followed his gaze and turned to see a tired-looking Isla stepping out to join them.

“How are ye feeling?” Arran asked, standing to greet her, his brother did the same.

“I feel better. I’m still rather tired though,” Isla said.

Her dark brown hair was rather disheveled from lying down, and her eyes weren’t able to fully open, as though tiredness was a weight that sat on her eyelids.

“Ye are all right though?” Arran asked, putting his hands on her arms and looking down at her.

“How many times are ye going to ask me if I’m all right?” she asked

with a slight chuckle. Her eyes met his and Arran felt as though the world around them was slowly fading away. This was the only view that he wanted, and he could tell that she was feeling the same.

“All right,” Colton cut in, splintering their moment like glass shattering. “I dinnae ken about ye two, but I’m rather hungry.”

Arran couldn’t help but laugh at his brother as Colton moved past them and back inside of the inn. He quickly pressed a chaste kiss to Isla’s lips before following after him.

Isla sat at the table with the two brothers, and no matter what she thought about, her appetite refused to return. She was still tired, her body weary from all the stress, traveling, and worry. She felt as though she could sleep for the rest of the week and her body would only just recover from the journey that they had been on.

Knowing that Lachlan was in the town set her on edge, but at the same time, Isla couldn't help but want to go and talk to him. After all, he was her friend, her oldest and closest friend. He had been there through everything else, and to just let him be taken away felt wrong.

Isla wished at that moment that she had the counsel of her aunt. Elsie would instantly know what to do and would help her to achieve it. Isla didn't want Arran to think that she was betraying him, but she still wanted to go and see Lachlan.

She thought about the last time that she had visited him, how he had shouted at her, told her to leave and never come back. Isla remembered how her heart had shattered, breaking in a way that had signified the end of their friendship. But she had to know that he wouldn't have really hurt her. She had to believe that he could not have fallen so far.

"Are ye sure ye are all right, lass?" Colton asked from across the table.

"Aye, I'm fine," Isla said, trying to perk up.

"Ye are all good," Arran said reassuringly as he wrapped an arm around her.

She managed a smile as they continued with their conversation.

“I swear that when we were younger, I thought that ye would become some kind of evil ruler,” Colton laughed, taking another swig of his ale.

“Why would ye think that?” Arran chuckled.

“Because ye were always chasing me or scaring me, jumping out in dark corners, I thought that ye were going to be like that as a Laird,” Colton said. “I used to tell some of the young lads that I trained with.”

“I cannae believe it,” Arran laughed as Isla managed to at least chuckle.

She couldn’t imagine Arran as an evil Laird; he was gentle and kind, and Isla could see how much he adored the people that looked up to him.

After Isla managed to eat something, albeit she left a lot of her dinner, she was ready for another sleep that would be much longer than her simple afternoon nap.

“I was thinking that I will head off early in the morning and try to get the prisoner to the castle before yer arrival,” Colton said as they started to move away from the table.

“Aye, I think that would be a wise decision,” Arran nodded.

Isla thought about Lachlan - the prisoner - but in her mind, the name just didn’t fit him. She winced at the fact that it was his new name and all that he would be known by from that point on. She wished that things could have been different, but there would be no saving him anymore.

“All right, then it’s settled. I will set off at first light ahead of the two of ye.”

She knew that there was nothing she would be able to say to change either of their minds, but that didn’t make it any easier for her to bear. Her thoughts were with Lachlan and how she really was never

going to see him again.



She sat on the edge of her bed that evening with a furrowed brow, her lips were pressed together in a tight line, and it was clear to Arran that something was wrong. Isla was no longer trying to hide how she felt, but she wasn't expecting him to understand.

"What's wrong?" Arran asked as she felt his arm against her back. He was rubbing soothing circles, trying in vain to help her relax.

"I'm nae sure," she admitted. "I'm glad that Lachlan cannae hurt me anymore...but..."

"But he is yer friend," Arran finished as he moved to climb onto the bed beside her. Isla stared into his deep, blue eyes, wishing herself to get lost in them forever and never have to worry about a thing again.

"Aye, he was my friend," she corrected. "Now, he is someone from my past, and that is just taking a while to settle in."

Arran was silent for a while, which Isla was grateful for. She didn't want to hear him trying to understand her issue, but she also didn't feel like explaining herself. She just wanted to be alone with her thoughts to ponder over what to do.

The more active part of her mind wanted to go and see him. She wanted to look him in the eyes one last time before Colton was to take him away at first light.

"I think that it will settle in yer mind. It may nae be today or tomorrow, but ye will understand why this has to be done," Arran said, sitting up a little.

"I ken but--"

"He attacked ye, Isla," Arran said, his expression completely serious. "And I'm nae the kind of man who will just let him walk free after that. Ye ken what could have happened if my brother hadn't stepped in and stopped him. Lachlan could have hurt ye in ways that I dinnae even want to think about; he deserves what he's getting."

Isla shuddered as she tried not to think about the attack. It wasn't a pleasant memory, and it certainly wasn't the kind of thought that she wanted to hover on for too long.

"I ken," she whispered, staring down at her hands in her lap.

"Come on, I want to show ye how much I love ye," Arran said, guiding her face gently with one of his hands.

Isla felt incredibly grateful that he was there for her and cared about her so much, she couldn't imagine Lachlan attacking her and having nobody to help her afterward. It felt as though Arran was kissing the mental wounds better as his lips met hers, his arms were wrapped around her protectively, and part of her never wanted to leave that embrace.

Isla kissed back, moving further onto the bed until Arran was lying down on his back and Isla lay on his chest. He stared up at her, hair slightly disheveled from the movements. Isla smiled softly down at him and pressed her lips to his once more.

She was still unable to comprehend that the man before her had chosen her. He was a Laird, and she was just a girl from the forest. She came with such a strange story, and people like Lachlan would be associated with her.

"What's wrong?" he whispered as she faltered.

"Sorry, I was just... it does nae matter," she mumbled and sat back.

"Tell me," he replied in a soft tone, sitting up. One of his hands moved up to caress her face.

"It's nothing. I was just having a moment of doubt," Isla said in a small voice.

"Doubt?" Arran's eyes widened as he suddenly sat up. "Doubts about... being with me?"

Isla blinked and stared at him as though he was mad. She wasn't sure why any woman would have doubts about liking him, he was so handsome and strong, yet also so kind.

“Nay, about ye liking me,” she said, feeling her cheeks flush. If he did have any doubts about that, she was about to find out and she was suddenly feeling incredibly vulnerable.

“Well, I can tell ye right now that I dinnae have any of those doubts. I love ye, Isla,” Arran said, moving forward to close the gap between them. “I dinnae ken how else I can show ye that. I ken that it will nae be conventional of a Laird to marry a woman like ye, but I want to because I love ye. I dinnae need any other reason.”

Isla felt like a fool at that moment. She felt like all the other women in society who would pine over men and doubt themselves in the stories that her aunt had told her when she was younger. Isla had always thought that she would be better than them, but she was about to meet women just like that, and she wasn’t sure if she really was all that different to them.

“All right,” she said with a small smile. “I just wanted to make sure that ye wanted this as much as I do.”

“Of course I do,” Arran said with a chuckle. “I would nae have brought ye all this way if I did nae think that I wanted to be with ye.”

Isla didn’t want to speak on it anymore. She had received all the confirmation that she needed and instead of responding with her words, she quickly pressed her lips to his with much more passion and need than before.

The feeling of his body against hers was just what she needed to rid her senses of all that the day had brought. She smiled against his lips, feeling his body moving to get even closer to her. Isla moaned as she lay back, feeling Arran’s hips pressing against hers as he hovered over her.

He started to trail kisses down her neck in the way that she enjoyed so much, it sent shivers through her body and caused her to arch her back. There was a spot in the crook of her neck that he would always focus on, it was the most sensitive spot that could elicit moans from Isla.

Her arms were around his shoulders in an instant and she played with the hair at the nape of his neck. Isla couldn’t let her thoughts trail to anything else in moments like that.

She moaned and let her head fall back against the cushions. Arran continued kissing while bringing his hands up to push her dress from her shoulders. Isla couldn't help but shudder as her skin became exposed to the cool air of the room.

"This is how much I love ye," Arran whispered as he kissed down the valley between her exposed breasts. "I love every part of ye, and I love seeing the way that I can make ye feel so good."

"Oh, Arran!" Isla moaned as he continued kissing down her body, paving the way to her most sensitive region. His fingers were already trailing up the sides of her thighs, teasing her by never quite reaching just where she needed him. She squirmed beneath him, trying her hardest to control her sensitive body as he continued to explore it.

"I love ye here, and here," he said while kissing either side of her hips. "I love all of ye, and I would nae have ye any other way."

Isla couldn't help the way that her lips curled up into a smile at his words. She had never felt so strongly for anyone before,

He kissed just above where she needed him before she could feel his fingers tracing around her entrance. Isla's toes were already starting to curl, she could feel him hovering, but not quite giving her what she so desperately needed.

"Please, Arran," she groaned, earning a smile from him. He was clearly amused by the way that he could make her need him so much, but Isla didn't care at that moment. All she cared about was him touching her. "Please," she whispered again.

He didn't say anything else, but Isla let her eyes roll back as his mouth pressed against her most sensitive bundle of nerves. He slid a finger into her entrance at the same time and started to pump at a rhythm that left Isla gripping the sheets.

"Oh!" she moaned out, not caring if her back was arched. "Arran," she moaned his name repeatedly as he applied even more pressure to her. Isla could already feel the familiar warmth building up in her lower stomach as she pushed her hips into his face, groaning at the way that he could make her feel with just his fingers and mouth.

"I need ye now," he groaned while moving up her body once more.

Isla lay back and watched as he quickly rid himself of his clothes, uncaring for where he threw them in the room. She stared down at his toned torso, but it was even lower that caught her attention. Arran was already incredibly hard, and it was clear that he wanted to do something about it quickly.

He swiftly moved back over her until his face was level with hers. Arran used his arms to hold himself up as he started to rub his member up and down her wet entrance. Isla's eyes closed at the feeling, but they both were already wanting more.

"Is this all right?" He paused to ask as though it was her first time all over again.

"Aye, I need ye more than anything," she said breathlessly.

That was the only confirmation that Arran seemed to need as he pressed his member to her entrance and slowly started to push in. Isla felt the familiar pinch, but there was no pain anymore; she had grown used to his size and only enjoyed the pleasure of the situation.

Her toes curled once more and she threw her head back as he pushed all the way into her, unable to believe how good he made her feel.

"Isla," Arran groaned her name, moving down until his head was almost resting on her chest.

They were both a mess of moans as he slowly pulled out and thrustled into her once more. Isla was quick to wrap her legs around him, pulling him even closer to her and making sure that there was barely any space between their bodies. She wanted to feel all of him, she wanted to be connected in the most intimate way that two people could be connected.

He was thrusting quickly, as though chasing after his high with a hunger that couldn't be stopped. Isla moaned loudly, uncaring if people heard them. She was to be the future Lady of the clan, and so she knew that they were doing nothing wrong.

They were going to be together for the rest of their lives. She didn't see why getting a head start in the bedroom would be a bad thing.

"I'm close," Isla groaned as she felt herself tightening around him. Her

breathing was heavy and both of their bodies were covered in a sheen of sweat. The only light in the room came from a few candles, and as one, they glistened in the half light.

“Aye, me too,” Arran moaned as his eyes closed. He was twitching from within her and his thrusts were starting to become uneven.

His arms were flexed and he was covered in sweat, but in that moment, Isla felt as though he was the most attractive that he had ever been. It was a side of him that only she would see, and that felt special.

“I love ye,” Isla moaned as she felt her climax starting to take over her body.

A string of curse words left Arran’s lips as he too started to come undone. “Aye, I love ye more.”

“I dinnae think that’s possible,” Isla whispered as she let her body move through the rhythms of pleasure that washed through her.

“Oh god,” Arran groaned as he stilled inside of her.

She had never felt so good in all of her life. She felt as though they had made love as opposed to just having sex. They had crossed a special boundary that caused her heart to leap.

“I love ye,” she whispered again.

“Aye, I love ye more,” Arran said, breathing heavily. He pulled out and lay down on the bed beside her.

Isla felt too tired to respond to him. Her chest rose and fell heavily, and the draft from the window was finally welcomed as it aided in cooling them both down.

“Ye cannae love me more than I love ye,” she whispered as she ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

They lay like that for what felt like a long time, although Isla was sure that it couldn’t have been longer than a half hour. She was smiling to herself as the light of the candles started to die out. Arran had shown

her just how much he cared about her over the last day, and she really felt as though she couldn't ask for anything more in a person.



After a while, Isla could hear the soft snores that signified Arran had fallen asleep next to her. She couldn't help but chuckle at how easily he seemed to be able to do that when she had the hardest time falling asleep with so little noise.

She was used to the sounds of the forest around her, and yet she was instead surrounded by the sounds of the inn downstairs and the noise of the town from the window. Isla lay there for a moment as she thought about all that had happened over the last day and how it had been both a good and bad way to end their journey.

She was pleased that Arran had been able to reunite with his brother, but she hated what had happened with Lachlan. The opportunity was there, and she knew that it would be dangerous, but it was a risk that Isla realized she was willing to take.

She sucked in a deep breath and slowly started to get up from the bed, hoping that her movements wouldn't disrupt Arran from his sleep.

Isla quickly found her dress and padded across the room to where her boots were. She didn't want to leave without an explanation, afraid that if Arran would wake up, he would panic as to where she had gone. However, there was no other way to tell him where she was going since there was no parchment in the room.

After quickly dressing and smoothing down her hair, Isla took one last deep breath before opening the door to their room and slipping out into the corridor.

“Lachlan?” Isla whispered into the darkness as she held onto the lantern. Her hand was shaking slightly, but she was hoping that it wasn’t too noticeable. The night had been much colder than she was anticipating, and a bout of shivers gripped her body. The fear that Arran would catch her and the danger that she had put herself in wasn’t helping as she stood in the center of the corridor, away from the cell in front of her. “Lachlan, it’s Isla.”

“I didn’t think that ye would come and see me after... what happened,” he grumbled.

She couldn’t see him, and the sound of just his voice was unnerving to her.

“I had to see ye one last time, to say goodbye,” she said, hoping that he couldn’t detect the fear in her voice.

“Did ye nae learn anything the last time that ye came to say goodbye to me?” his voice sounded menacing as it bounced off the cold walls.

“Ye were my friend, we have shared so many years together that it felt wrong to nae say goodbye,” Isla said in a much more sure-sounding voice.

There was a moment of silence that passed through the jailhouse like a shudder. Isla wanted nothing more than to be back in her bed with Arran by her side, but she had to talk to Lachlan or she wouldn’t be able to sleep.

“I was told by Arran that I was never to see ye again, so ye have come without him knowing?” Lachlan said as he finally stepped into the

orange glow of her lantern. Isla could see the smile on his face as he spoke.

“Arran was here?” Isla asked with a frown.

“He did nae tell ye?” Lachlan’s smile only continued to grow.

“Ye think that ye can mess with us, but there is nothing that ye can say that can hurt me,” Isla said, trying to stand her ground.

“Ye are the one who came to talk to me,” he reminded her.

“That does nae mean that I came to listen to more of yer schemes,” Isla said quickly. “I came to tell ye that ye are a criminal now, that ye will be banished from this land by Arran.”

“I did nae ken that he was a Laird,” Lachlan muttered as he hung his head.

“That does nae excuse what ye did,” Isla said with narrowed eyes, daring to take a step closer to him. “Ye were going to attack me, and ye would have done so if Colton had nae been there. Dinnae try to blame it on Arran’s status.”

Isla thought about the revelation that she had made while on the journey to the castle, it was something that she had wanted to speak with her aunt about, but Lachlan was her next best person. “Did ye ken about my parents?”

“Did ye ken what?”

“That they were Laird and Lady of Baillie Clan?” Isla said as though it were common knowledge between them.

“I had heard the rumors in the town, I suppose that ye have now heard these rumors for yerself,” Lachlan said with a slight nod.

“But ye never told me,” Isla said with a growing frown.

“I never thought they were true,” Lachlan shrugged. “I thought of ye and yer aunt. I could nae imagine Elsie’s sister being a Lady when Elsie is... well, Elsie. I just thought that it was a story, one that people

had made up when they were bored.”

“Elsie never told me either, and I still cannae be sure that it’s true,” Isla said, staring down at the floor for a moment.

“Ye are leaving Elsie all alone,” Lachlan said as he held onto the bars. “Think about yer aunt, ye are leaving her on her own.”

“I would rather she be alone than in the company of a man who tries to rape his friend,” she snapped.

“Isla, ye ken that I would have never-”

“Nay, I dinnae ken ye anymore,” she said. “I dinnae ken this man in front of me. He scares me because he is nae the man that I grew up with. He is nae the man that I share so many memories with.”

“Please,” Lachlan whispered, emotion broke his voice.

“Please what? Ye have done nothing but try to hurt me since ye found out about Arran and I. Ye were supposed to be my friend and support me,” Isla could feel tears rising in her eyes and a lump forming in her throat.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a small voice. Isla had to strain her ears to hear his weak apology.

“Lachlan, I wish that I was leaving this jail house with closure. But I feel as though the only reason that ye are sorry is because ye are on the other side of those bars right now.”

“Please, Isla,” Lachlan said with a desperate groan. “Please get me out of here. I promise that I will nae hurt ye.”

Isla realized what a mistake it was coming to see him. She had only given him hope by going on her own, and she realized that he was just saying what she wanted to hear so that she would let him out.

“I’m sorry, Lachlan, but this is where we say goodbye,” she said finally and turned to leave.

“No,” Lachlan jolted as he sat up to look at her. “No, please, come

back!"

Isla kept walking until she was out of the jailhouse and onto the road outside. She was thankful for the cover of darkness as she extinguished the lantern, it allowed her tears to fall freely without anyone seeing.

She didn't want to be caught weeping for a criminal. Because after everything he had done to her, Isla was still incapable of completely hating him. Somewhere deep inside of him, there was still the boy that she had loved being friends with.



The next morning, Isla awoke early. She had barely slept a couple of hours before the sun was streaming through her window, but she was determined to watch him leave. Arran was still asleep as he had been throughout the entire night. By the time that Isla had returned to their room, she let out a heavy sigh in relief that he was exactly where she had left him.

She waited by the window for Colton to leave the inn and head in the direction of the jailhouse. Isla couldn't sleep when she thought about what Lachlan had become. It was Elsie that she was worried about, and she didn't want her aunt to learn about what had happened to him. It would only cause her to worry more.

She sat by the window until Colton returned with Lachlan in chains. Isla felt a part of her heart breaking for him, but she knew that it was the right thing to do. He had attacked her, and she would never feel safe again if he was allowed back in those lands.

Colton was busy getting his horse ready as Lachlan stood solemnly in his chains. Isla couldn't help but notice how thin he had become now that the unmerciful glare of the morning sun was upon him. There were no shadows to hide in anymore, Isla could see what had become of her friend.

What Isla hadn't been expecting was for their eyes to meet.

Lachlan stared up at her as Colton was helped by the jailhouse keeper to attach the jail cart to the rear of his horse. His eyes were dark, large shadows spread across his cheeks, but he didn't react to seeing her.

Instead, he simply nodded.

Isla didn't know what the nod meant as she watched him being led into the barred cart. Colton locked him in before returning to his horse. It had felt like a nod of acceptance finally, as though Lachlan was accepting his fate and was letting it happen.

Isla kept her own expression rather stony as she watched him go, it was the last time that she would ever see him. She didn't want to visit him in the castle dungeons, and Isla knew that she wouldn't be able to be there when Lachlan was sentenced.

She watched his dark head of hair until it disappeared out of sight, her path never to cross with his again.

She returned to bed with a strange sensation inside of her. It felt like relief that she wasn't allowing it to be fully realized. She was glad that there was no longer the threat of someone like Lachlan lurking around every corner. Isla chose to focus on that as she curled up beside her future husband, sighing heavily as she closed her eyes and tried one more time for some peaceful sleep.



Arran awoke late in the morning. He couldn't help but smile as he realized what the presence so close to him was. He felt content and happy with Isla by his side, her hand resting on his chest as she breathed heavily in her sleep.

Even while she was sleeping, she had mastered looking beautiful. Arran vowed that one day he would ask her if she had been friends with nymphs in the forest and had struck a deal. For he couldn't imagine that any normal girl could be so beautiful.

And she was his. That was a thought that he still couldn't get over. He had long ago abandoned the idea that he would find someone that he truly wanted to marry, but he had finally found her, and he couldn't quite believe it.

The morning felt incredibly peaceful as he listened to her soft snores. Isla had been through so much, and still, she was able to sleep by his side as though everything was fine. He knew that the day before had taken a lot out of her, and so he let her sleep for a little while longer.

Arran didn't want to disturb her by moving out from under her, and so he simply lay there and thought about the day that lay ahead of them.

He was finally going to see his mother and sister again. The thought sent a flurry of excitement through his gut, and he was just glad that they would learn the truth about him still being alive.

Finally, Isla started to stir, although he could tell as soon as her eyes opened that she was still incredibly tired.

"Good morning," he smiled and cleared his throat slightly.

"Good morning," Isla grumbled as she rested her head back down and closed her eyes once more.

"We are going to have to start our day soon if ye want to reach the castle," Arran said, chuckling.

"Can we nae have another few minutes like this?" Isla asked with a groan.

"Aye, I'm sure that it will nae hurt anyone." Arran smiled down at her while stroking a hand through her soft hair. It was spread out like a dark web across his chest, but he didn't mind; it sort of tickled his bare skin.

“If ye did nae like the conditions in the holding cell, then I’m afraid that these dungeons are going to be quite the shock,” Colton said as he unlocked the cell.

He had made good time back to the castle and he was relieved to know that the announcement of his arrival had been passed on to his mother and sister. All that was left for him to do was to lock the prisoner away.

“I was fine in the jail cell,” Lachlan muttered.

Only when he was stood inside of his new cell did Colton close the door and relax.

“Put yer hands through the bars and I will take off yer chains,” he said, gesturing for the man to do so quickly. He was anxious to go and see his mother, and Lachlan was the only thing in his path.

“Ye could be a little more gentle,” the prisoner grunted as Colton quickly removed his chains.

The door was locked, and there was no way for Lachlan to escape, there were guards at all of the exits, and Colton had always made sure that the security of the dungeon was the utmost priority.

“Ye could have nae tried to attack the future Lady of this clan,” Colton said. He knew that he didn’t have to fire back at the clearly very weak man, but it did make him feel slightly better.

The man moved to the back of the cell where he slumped down and leaned against the wall. Colton tried to suppress a shudder that passed

through him at how quiet the dungeon was.

He had always hated having to go down there, and so he stood away from the bars so that the closest guard could see him from the corridor.

Without another word, Colton quickly turned on his heels and left the dungeons, not wanting to look upon the ghostly face of its latest inhabitant. He felt a shiver run down his spine as the door shut behind him, the sound of the bolt locking into place followed him down the hall until Colton turned a corner and was away from that area of the castle.

He had more important things to think about, and that meant that he was going to have to find his mother and sister.

The first place that he went to was the great hall. It was the most obvious place to search since it would be where they both resided together. Colton winced as he realized how vulnerable he had left the castle without his presence there. The guards looked to him when his brother was gone, and he started to understand the kind of danger and exposure that he had created by going to find Arran.

Colton was lucky to not come back to the castle being occupied by a man who would claim the clan for his own. His panic started to increase as he quickly made his way toward the hall, but the guards weren't outside of the doors, and Colton knew that meant neither his mother nor Keira would be inside.

Still, he had a look just to make sure, but his observation had been correct. The large wooden doors heaved open with a protesting groan, and he was met with a vast, empty room. Colton let out a huff of annoyance while running a hand through his dark hair, he knew that the castle was large enough that he could end up searching for the rest of the day.

He turned around at the sound of footsteps running toward him, they were coming from the corridor that he hadn't yet been down.

"Colton!"

Keira. It was Keira.

“He’s alive!” Colton shouted down the hall.

“What?” Keira stopped running abruptly, sending strands of her hair across her face.

“Arran is alive!”

He quickly jogged to meet up with his younger sister, embracing her tightly and holding onto her as though she would be taken with a gust of wind.

“Where is he then?” Keira’s happiness quickly gave way to confusion as she glanced around the corridor. It was empty aside from the two siblings, but Colton wasn’t disheartened.

“He’s coming, I just left this morning before them,” he started to explain.

“Them?”

“I... have a lot to explain,” Colton realized all of a sudden. “Or perhaps I should leave it for him to explain. I’m sure that Arran would do a better job than me.”

“Is he all right?” Keira hesitated as Colton gave her some space.

“Aye, he’s well. I would say that he is stronger than ever,” Colton couldn’t help but beam.

“I’m so glad that he is alive, but I want to see him,” Keira said as her bright eyes pooled with tears of relief.

“He will be here soon,” Colton said while glancing down the hall. “Where is Mother?”

“She is in the courtyard,” Keira said with a heavy sigh.

Colton realized that he had been so caught up in delivering the news that he hadn’t taken a moment to realize that something wasn’t right. He wasn’t sure what it was at first, but he turned to his sister and noticed a look of fear in her eyes.

“What happened while I was gone?” he asked as they both started off in the direction of the castle’s main courtyard.

“There’s a lot to explain,” his sister muttered as she led him through to a door. He felt the cold wind on his face before anything else, Colton had to try incredibly hard not to wince as the wind blew back his hair.

“Mother,” Colton said as he rushed past Keira to see his mother. She was looking distant, as though she was still wrapped up in her grief. “Mother, I have really good news!”

“Colton?” she asked, peering at him with dark and confused eyes.

“Aye, it’s me,” he said, smiling at her until he quickly wrapped his arms around her. “Arran is alive!”

He watched as his mother stared between him and his sister before finally allowing her eyes to widen.

“This is nay cruel trick?”

“Nay,” Colton said quickly. “He is alive, I was with him just this morning, and he will be here soon.”

“Ye said they...” Keira said with narrowed eyes. It seemed that his sister had also inherited the inquisitive trait that he and Arran shared.

“Ye said that there was something going on here? What happened while I was gone?” Colton asked, quickly changing the subject. He was sure that something much worse had happened at the castle while he was away.

“It was Jonah,” his mother spoke up as Keira crossed her arms over her chest.

“What did he do?” Colton asked as he felt his expression darkening. His fists were clenched as he thought about how stupid he had been to leave a weasel like Jonah to sniff around the empty castle.

“He asked for my hand in marriage,” Keira spoke up. “But I was nae going to marry him, and Mother agreed. He was here all along to try

and become Laird.”

“I knew that people would do so,” Colton sighed as he let his eyes close for a moment. “I’m so sorry for leaving ye both here on yer own, but I just had a feeling that Arran was still alive, and I was right.”

“Where has he been?” Keira asked. There was a determination in her voice that he knew wouldn’t ebb until he gave her the answers that she desired.

“He was attacked in a forest far out,” Colton said. “He hit his head and lost his memory.”

“What?” Keira gasped as both she and her mother stepped forward to hear more of the story.

“Aye, he was found by a woman and her aunt in the forest...”

Colton told the story as Arran had told him at the inn the night before. It didn’t sound believable, but it was the story that Arran had told him, and it would be Arran that would have to answer his family’s questions.

“And he is bringing this forest girl back here?” Colton could already see the distaste in his mother’s expression as she asked the question.

“I have never seen him like this before. He is so in love with her, it’s... quite beautiful actually.”

Colton knew that this would strike them both as strange, just as it had for Colton to see his brother in such a way. But it was a good kind of strange, the one that he would wish on the people that he wanted to be happy.

“I cannae wait to meet her,” Keira said, smiling broadly. His mother was just about managing a smile, but Colton had already anticipated that she would have her reservations.

“Where is Jonah now?” Colton asked, thinking back to the revelation that Keira had told him.

“The weasel is gone,” she spoke as though she had taken a bite of a

rather sour fruit. “But I just ken that it will nae be the last time that we see him.”

“We will be ready when he returns, I will nae let him take this clan from under us,” Colton said, his hand instinctively touching his sword at his side.

“We need our Laird back,” his mother said.

“Aye, and he will be here soon,” Colton nodded. “I had to come ahead with a prisoner, but that is all dealt with now.”

“It sounds like ye have both had quite an eventful journey,” Keira said as she raised an eyebrow at him.

“Look, I will tell ye all in more detail when Arran gets here. I dinnae feel comfortable talking about his journey without him. I’m sure that there are things I’ve left out.”

“Or things that he does nae want his mother and sister knowing,” Keira shot back with a slight smirk.

Colton knew exactly what she meant; Arran had never been open about things like love or if he was even interested in getting married, he was going to be introducing a woman to his family, and it was going to be a new experience for them all. At that moment, Colton didn’t envy what lay ahead for Isla, he wasn’t sure that she would even know what she was walking into.



Isla lay stretched out on the bed, knowing that the castle was waiting for them with each moment that she lay there. Arran was staring out of the window, wearing only his trousers, and his hands rested lazily by his hips.

“I ken that ye are looking at me,” he said with a slight smirk.

“Am I nae allowed to stare at ye, my Laird?” Isla asked in a teasing tone.

Isla let her head fall back and her eyes closed as she tried to cling onto

sleep. Her body was exhausted, and she hadn't been able to get as much sleep as she had been hoping for the previous night.

"Ye can stare at me as much as ye like on one condition," Arran said.

While her eyes were closed, he had moved closer to her so that he was standing over the bed. Isla felt her skin bristle as he came close to her, she could feel his breath fanning over her face but she still kept her eyes closed.

"We need to leave soon for the castle."

"Aye," Isla nodded, finally looking up at him. "I will get ready then."

She opened her eyes to find his face incredibly close to hers. There was a loving look on his face, the kind that was something Isla had come to know well over the course of their journey.

She pressed her lips up to his, craning her neck to close the gap. It wasn't the most comfortable position to be kissing someone, but Isla didn't care at that moment. Arran quickly made sure to move around until he was in a better position, she could feel his hands roaming lower down her body, but she quickly placed her own over them.

"I thought we had to go?" she whispered against his lips.

"Aye, but I will never get enough of ye and yer beautiful body," he groaned in response.

"I suppose that we will have plenty of time at the castle," she said with a slight chuckle.

"Ye are right," Arran nodded.

After a while, she finally managed to pull herself up from the bed and move over to where her clothes were waiting for her. She wasn't used to the many outfits that she was sure the wife of a Laird would own, but Isla also wasn't used to wearing the same thing for so long.

"I think the first thing that I'm looking forward to is definitely having some clean clothes," she said with a chuckle while slipping into her dress.

“Aye, I fear that the two of us do stink from long days of riding,” Arran said as he came up behind her.

“And...other activities,” Isla said with a slight smirk on her face as she moved her body back until she felt his chest behind her.

“Aye, that too,” Arran agreed, causing them both to chuckle.

“Will ye promise me one thing when we are back at yer castle?” Isla asked, turning around to look at him.

“Aye, of course, anything for ye,” Arran nodded quickly.

“Will ye be merciful in yer sentencing of Lachlan?”

Isla knew that it wasn't the kind of response that Arran had been expecting, he blinked a few times before his brow furrowed.

“Ye want me to spare him after what happened?” his voice was laced with confusion.

“Nay, but I dinnae want to see him being punished by death,” Isla said in a much smaller voice. “Banished, but nae dead.”

“Isla, he almost-”

“I have forgiveness in my heart, and I would hope that ye have the same,” she said quickly, cutting him off. “Ye have shown me that ye can be a kind and just Laird, but I need ye to show that to Lachlan too.”

Isla could tell that he didn't like what he was agreeing to, but she knew that in her heart it was the right decision. She would feel as though Lachlan's blood was on her hands and she wouldn't be able to sleep at night if she had agreed to his death.

“Ye drive a hard bargain,” Arran chuckled in disbelief. “But yer views are honest and exactly the kind that I want by my side.”

“Well then, I suppose we have one final leg of the journey ahead of us,” Isla said as she gathered her few belongings.

“Aye, onwards to the castle.”

Colton stared in disbelief at the sight before him. Less than two hours ago he had been reassuring his mother and sister that everything was going to be all right. How wrong he had been.

Jonah had made good on his promise, but this time he wasn't alone. Rows of guards were with him from his own clan, and he was advancing upon the castle without stopping. Colton swallowed thickly, knowing that Arran wasn't going to make it back in time to help him. This was his fight to be had.

"Go," he said to his mother.

"Where?"

"Ye have to find Arran, ye have to warn him of what's happening," he said while keeping his eyes trained on the advancing men.

"But what about ye?" Keira was at his side and staring out over the land too.

"I will stay and fight," Colton said as he straightened up.

"Come out!" a voice from below called.

Colton froze at the way that he knew the voice that had spoken.

"Colton!" Jonah's voice boomed from below.

"We cannae get out now," his mother whispered as though Jonah was only a few steps away.

“Aye, then stay with me and I will protect ye.”

“The tunnels,” Keira said as they walked back inside. Colton would face Jonah and hear what he had to say before there would be any fighting.

“Ye will nae have time to reach them,” Colton shook his head. He unsheathed his sword and prepared himself for the doors to the great hall to open.

“We stand a chance at least,” Keira said from his side.

“Colton,” his mother said as she took his free hand and squeezed it for a moment.

“I will protect ye both with my life, I promise,” Colton said as he let his features settle into an expression of neutrality.

Colton stood in front of his mother and sister. Nobody spoke as they waited for Jonah to join them, there were guards ready behind the secret doors at the other end of the room, but Colton knew that it would be him who had to kill Jonah.

Finally, the sound of footsteps approached the large doors, causing Colton to grip his sword a little tighter. His heart was racing, pumping in his chest as though it were close to escaping.

“At last,” Jonah’s voice rang out as he entered the hall as he had already done so many times in the past.

“Jonah, leave now and nobody has to get hurt,” Colton pushed as much authority into his voice as possible.

“Do ye think that I came all this way with my men just to turn around at the sound of yer voice?” Jonah asked with a scoff.

“Then why have ye come?”

“I’ve come for the lairdship,” he stated proudly.

Colton felt his expression darken. There was nothing worse than a power-hungry man. He had seen so many of them come into their

castle as guests. They could smell opportunity as though it were the sweetest perfume.

“There is nae lairdship for ye to take,” Keira snapped from just behind him. Colton had almost forgotten for a moment that his sister wasn’t going to just accept the news either.

“Aye, there is,” Jonah said with a chuckle. “I asked already for yer hand in marriage and the answer was very clear. I now turn to Rowan.”

Colton felt his arms tensing at the way that Jonah was staring at his mother.

“Ye want to marry me?” her eyes were wide in shock.

“I will nae be a very popular laird if I have to take the lairdship for myself. It would nae be accepted by the clan,” Jonah explained with a mere shrug.

“Ye will nae be accepted here nay matter what ye do,” Colton said while daring to take another step forward.

“I thought that ye would say that,” Jonah’s smile returned to his face.

It wasn’t a smile of happiness; it was the kind that was filled with danger. He was thinking and scheming, and Colton was terrified of what that would mean for his family.

“Ye need to leave, we are nae pandering to yer whims,” Colton said once more.

“I need her hand in marriage,” Jonah said, gesturing to Rowan. “And if I dinnae get it, then I have other uses for yer sister there.”

“Ye will nae touch either of them.”

“I will use force, and then I will kill her,” Jonah continued.

Colton knew that kind of talk would upset his sister, but he kept a brave face and only let the words fuel his anger. Jonah was looking incredibly pleased with himself, and Colton was using up far too much

energy to try and stop himself from lurching forward and punching him. He couldn't believe that the man was threatening to ruin his sister and then kill her, it was so extreme. But it was exactly the move that men like Jonah would make to gain more power.

"Ye will nae get anywhere near my family," Colton snarled.

"None of ye will leave here alive if I dinnae get what I want."

Colton felt a hand on his shoulder and his heart sank a little. He knew what his mother was like, and he knew what she would do to make sure that they would both be safe. Colton felt himself wince as she appeared in his peripheral vision.

"If I come with ye and agree to this marriage, ye will let my children go?" Rowan said while taking another step forward.

Jonah's own guards were lurking in the doorway of the great hall, but they had clearly been told not to come any closer. Colton's mind was racing to find another solution, but nothing that he thought of seemed to come to a better conclusion.

"Mother, please, dinnae do this," he urged her, but Rowan shook her head.

"I have to protect ye both," she muttered, turning to face her son for just a moment.

"I can agree to those terms, although ye will both nae be allowed back here," Jonah said. "And the wedding will be tomorrow. I dinnae care for yer traditions."

Colton knew that if they were to return with Arran to the castle, they would have to fight their way back in.

"It's all right, this is the only way," Rowan continued as she gestured to her children.

"Come on," Keira muttered.

Colton shook his head for a moment, his eyes finding Jonah's eyes as he glared at him.

“This will nae be the last time that ye see me,” he said as a final threat.

“I think it is if ye want yer mother and sister to remain alive,” Jonah brushed it off with a shrug.

“Come on, let’s go now,” Keira was tugging at his arm.

Colton stood there for only a moment more before he met his mother’s eyes. She was willing him to go, and there was no fear in her expression.

Finally, he turned and started for the door that Keira was walking toward. Leaving his mother in such danger didn’t sit well with him, but Colton silently vowed that he would return and make sure that Jonah paid for what he was doing.

“We should nae have left her in there,” Colton said as he ran down the servant’s passage with his sword still drawn. Keira was just ahead of him, but he was still reluctant to follow.

“We have to get out of here. We need Arran’s help,” Keira said back to him. “We were outnumbered back there, and we need to regroup.”

“What if something happens?” Colton hesitated while staring back the way that they had come.

“If anyone can handle herself it is Rowan Woods,” Keira said in a rather serious tone. Colton couldn’t tell if she was trying to convince herself or him with her words. “It does nae leave me feeling good either, but we have a better chance of us all staying alive this way.”

Colton followed his sister through the web of servant hallways that eventually led out the back of the castle. It was much brighter outside than he had anticipated, but they had no time to waste. He knew that they had to get to Arran before he arrived back in the town and was captured himself.



Arran was feeling more content than he had for a long time. He was ready to go back home and let his family welcome the newest

addition. His hand was entwined with Isla's right up until they had to separate to ride their horses, but when they would stop for a break, he was glad to have her back in his arms quickly.

The morning was rather gloomy, and Isla was quiet. Arran assumed that it was simply due to the overwhelming day that lay ahead of her and he didn't want to push it. He swallowed thickly and continued on with the ride home, eager to reunite with his sister and mother.

"I cannae wait for ye to see that castle, it cuts up through the landscape and ye can see it for miles. I'm sure that we'll be able to see it soon actually."

"Aye, I'll keep an eye out," Isla nodded from his side.

They continued riding for only another hour before Arran recognized his surroundings, he knew that the castle would be coming up soon.

He could sense that Isla was nervous about going to his home, but he just hoped that his family would be as welcoming as they normally were when they received guests.

"It should just be around this corner and ye should be able to..."

Arran's words trailed off as the stone structure started to appear a few miles away. It did indeed tower over the town below and it made for a rather impressive sight. However, it was a large number of people outside the castle gates that caught him off guard.

"Are they yer men?" Isla asked with a frown.

"Nay, they should nae be there if they were my men," Arran murmured. They were too far away to see what color the men belonged to, but their armor glinted in the daylight and was unmistakable.

"What does this mean?" she asked hesitantly as Arran stopped riding for a moment.

"It means that something is wrong," he said with a frown. "It means that I'm going to have to fight my way into my own castle."

“But who would challenge ye when ye are nae even there?” Isla asked.

“I dinnae ken, but my brother did say that there were many people in the land who were vying for my position when they thought that I was dead,” Arran said, clenching his fists.

His family was in that castle, and he was starting to realize that he had put them in danger by delaying his return.

“We need to hurry,” he said, squeezing the sides of the horse.

“Hurry? Into the danger?”

He turned back to see Isla sat up straight on her horse, her eyes were wide with surprise.

“My mother and sister are there, Colton is there, I have to make sure that they are all right,” he said, torn between what to do.

“Aye, but we need to think carefully about this, otherwise we would just be riding into a trap,” Isla said as she ran a hand through her windswept hair.

She was right. There was a good chance that this was some kind of display; it was a trap that he would easily walk right into if it meant that his family was safe.

“But what other options do we have right now?” Arran asked with a heavy sigh.

He could see that Isla didn’t know how to answer his question either. The cool trickle of hopelessness was starting to seep through his chest, it ran like a stream through his body and spread doubt into any plan that he could muster.

“I’m just going to have to go in there and face the consequences if it is a trap,” he said finally.

“Nay, ye cannae do that, it is nae safe,” Isla said as she rode the short few steps to catch up to him. “Please, think about this.”

“Arran!”

He turned immediately at the sound of his name. He recognized the voice well, but it wasn't one that he had been expecting to hear.

“That sounded like-”

“Arran!”

“Colton?”

They were both peering in the direction of the sound, it was coming from the road ahead of them, the direction that they were supposed to be riding in. But there was his brother and sister, riding on one horse, and heading straight for them.

“What are ye doing here?” Arran asked with narrowed eyes. “Where's Mother?”

“It's a long story,” Colton said as he took a few deep breaths. “Jonah, the Laird, is trying to take over the clan. He wants the Lairdship for himself so that he has control of two clans.”

“Jonah McPhee,” Arran said his name as though he were weighing up the threat that he may cause to them. “Where is Mother?”

“He said that he could nae take the Lairdship by force and remain in power,” Keira started.

“Aye, there would be an uprising in the town.”

“So he is marrying Mother tomorrow,” Keira continued. “He is going to marry her, making himself the Laird. He is still following the news that ye are dead, but he does nae ken that ye will come and make him pay.”

Arran nodded along with the information that he was being given. His mind was reeling as he thought about his poor mother and what she was feeling at that moment. She had already been through so much, and this was certainly not what she needed.

“All right, but we cannae just charge in there as a four,” Arran said,

turning around to see Isla. “And I’m sorry that we dinnae have more time for introductions, but this is my sister, Keira, she has quite a big mouth at times.”

“That is nae true,” Keira said, folding her arms. “It’s nice to meet ye properly, Isla, and I will find a way to thank ye for saving my brother.”

“Anyone would have done what I did,” Isla said with a shrug as her cheeks heated and she looked down.

Affairs like that seemed rather small now that the entire clan was under attack from one man and his men. Arran tried to think about how they were going to defeat him, but nothing was looking too promising.

“He and his men are in and around the castle,” Colton said. “They have moved so close to our home.”

Arran’s eyes settled on the town below the castle, he knew that they would have to be careful if they were to venture so close to danger, but a plan was finally starting to form in his mind.

The next morning arrived much quicker than any of them had been anticipating. Isla had barely been able to sleep in the stable that they'd found on the edge of town, and she was sure that Arran had been up all night anyway.

His plan was quite mad, but she just hoped that it would work. They had spent the rest of the day sneaking around the town, avoiding the guards that were patrolling in search of Arran's own guards.

There were also men in the town that wanted to join the fight, and so any able bodied man was being asked to help the cause. Isla had never seen such solidarity; it was evident that the people in the town were just as unhappy about the change in Laird as the ruling family were themselves.

Isla winced at the tiredness that clung to her body, but she knew that she would have to be vigilant that day. They were going to storm the wedding before there was time to make it a legally binding agreement.

She knew that it would be a risky move, the castle was now crawling with guards that were no friend to Arran and his family. But the other guards, Arran's guards, had willingly united with him. They were ready to take back their home and stand for what was right.

"Are ye ready for this?" Isla asked Arran as he was starting to put on some armor for protection.

"I dinnae think that I am ever ready for a fight. It is simply one of those things that I'm going to have to do whether I like it or nae," he said while shrugging off her question. "I want ye to stay out here."

“And be away from ye?” Isla stated with wide eyes. “I dinnae think that’s a good idea, I will be exposed, and I would feel much safer at yer side.”

“But I cannae guarantee that ye will be safe at my side,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“Ye cannae guarantee that I will be safe anywhere,” Isla pointed out.

“I ken, but at least ye will nae be at the heart of the battle if ye stay here,” he tried to reason.

“I want to help,” Isla said. She knew that she wouldn’t back down, and she was sure that he understood that too. He would only be wasting his breath if he were to keep denying her this.

“All right, but I want ye to stay out of the way. I dinnae want ye trying to fight, that would be too dangerous.”

Isla smiled to herself at how protective he was being, even though she knew that he was right. It was a sign that he really did care about her.

“Be ready soon,” he said to her as she started off toward the horses. “We will have to start the raid on the castle to get to the wedding in time.”



Jonah stared at himself in the polished glass. The chambers didn’t yet feel like his, but soon they would be rightfully belonging to him. All that was left was to marry the McCann witch who had given him so much trouble.

He wanted to take the power that he so desperately craved, and he wanted to hold it in his grip and never let go. He smiled to himself at the thought of what he could do while overseeing two clans. He would have more land than any other Laird in the area, and he would have more men to help him fight too.

He wanted to spread his roots out like a tree, stretching to places he had never even been before. He couldn’t help but smile to himself. It

was all so close that he could practically taste it.

It was time. He was wearing a quilt in clan colors that were not his own. Even the clan that he was already the Laird of was never technically his to take. But that had been years ago, and nobody had ever challenged him on it, nobody had dared to interrupt his ascent to power. He was just hoping that he would be met with the same situation again.

He stalked through the empty halls, navigating through the castle and trying to remember where the chapel was located. It was to be a quick and brief ceremony, some of his men would be witnesses, but it would be over before a normal wedding would have even just started.

Jonah didn't care for the formalities or the traditions, all he wanted was to be Laird.

"My Laird," the priest bowed his head to him as Jonah walked into the bright room of the chapel. Sunlight streamed through the windows, casting golden slashes along the opposing walls.

"I'm ready for it, Father," Jonah nodded to the old man.

"We will be starting soon," he said.

The man had once served Arran, but their old Laird was dead and it was about time that they turned to a new force to be reckoned with. Jonah couldn't stop smiling to himself, there were people that were already following his orders.

There were guards positioned around the room just in case. Jonah wasn't sure what to expect from the brother and sister that he had let go. It was still bothering him that they had gotten away so easily, but he knew that he had to agree to the terms to get the Lairdship.

His men were on guard and ready for anything, but Jonah could feel the anxiety in his own heart - he was worried about what was to come.

Finally, the ceremony started. Jonah stood waiting with the priest as the main doors to the chapel opened, revealing his new bride in a tartan dress. She walked slowly, solemnly, as she kept her head down. Jonah didn't care if she was unhappy. She was going to make him so

powerful that he couldn't have cared if she was miserable.

The priest began to speak, and Jonah knew that it would soon be time to finalize the marriage. He turned to his bride once she had made it down the aisle; her handmaidens looked scared for her, but they quickly scurried away as soon as his attention was on them. They scattered like deer that had been spotted grazing in a field, and Jonah was the hunter with them in his sights.

He knew that he would be able to do anything once he was Laird, and he was already feeling slightly drunk with the power.

The priest was reading a passage of the bible, his voice bouncing around the empty chapel in a hollow echo. Jonah didn't care for the lack of people present; he had enough witnesses that he could rely on to tell others the news of what was happening. Nobody would be able to claim that him becoming the Laird wasn't legal.

"Is there any man who objects?" The priest finished with his verse and continued on with the ceremony. Jonah held his breath. His guards weren't about to disagree with him, but he wasn't sure about who else could be lurking in the castle to throw off his plans. He waited patiently for only another moment before the priest carried on speaking.

A low rumble could be heard coming from the doors at the entrance of the chapel. It caused the three of them at the altar to turn their heads in the direction of the sound. Jonah's eyes were narrowed, and he was slowly trying to reach for his sword at his side. The sound was getting louder, accompanied by the clang of armor.

Just as the realization of what was happening hit him, the doors flung open to reveal a sight that took him completely by surprise. It was Colton, but Arran was there too. The brothers were leading men into the room, storming through and beginning to cut down any of Jonah's men that stood in his way.

Jonah blinked in disbelief as the priest ducked out of the way. He had no choice but to draw his sword and attack any man who came too close. The battle was one in close quarters, making swinging his sword difficult as it hit into stone and wood. Jonah was grunting as he moved about the room, losing sight of Rowan, but he had no doubt that she was trying to get away.

Just as he turned, he saw a much younger woman trying to pull at Rowan's dress to make her move faster. Desperation was written across her face, and it was evident that she was struggling. She didn't look capable of defending herself, and in one quick move, Jonah had her in his arms.

He moved his sword up, pressing it threateningly against her neck. He could feel the panicked rise and fall of her chest as he held her against him, not knowing if she was going to walk away from the situation.

"Ye thought that ye would just be able to come in here and take her from me?" Jonah asked with a dark chuckle. "Arran!" he called into the crowd of fighting men.

Jonah was still in shock that the Laird had survived. He couldn't believe that he had been able to find his way back to the castle and recover from his injuries. Jonah started to wish that he had turned back to finish the job off before riding away.

"Jonah, let her go," Arran said as he approached slowly.

Keira and Colton were in the room too, and there was a look of concern on their faces as they also came forward to the front of the chapel.

"Let her go, Jonah," Keira snapped. "She's just an innocent girl."

"This innocent girl was trying to lead my bride away," Jonah said, smiling. He knew that he had them, that they were going to have to pander to what he wanted if they were going to see their friend alive again.

He continued pressing the sword against her neck, but he could see a wave of increased anger in Arran as he did so. Jonah was quick to make the connection in his mind of why the young Laird would be so angry at him for doing this. But it all made sense.

"Ah," he said with a chuckle. "Arran, ye are in like with this woman?"

Arran hesitated. He didn't even have to say anything for Jonah to know the truth.

“Let her go.”

“I will nae do such a thing,” Jonah said, shaking his head. “What will ye do? Kill me?”

“Aye, and then yer head will go up on a spike for people to spit at,” Arran snapped, his face filled with fury.

Jonah chuckled darkly at his words, but he wasn’t about to yield so easily.

“But is this nae more fun? I will be the Laird of two clans,” Jonah said while taking a step forward with the girl still against his chest. “I will be Jonah Laird of Clan Baillie and McCann.”

“Baillie?” the voice was small, and it took Jonah a moment to realize that it was coming from the girl in his arms.

She was unable to turn around to look at him because of the sword at her throat, but he could tell that something was wrong.

“Aye, that is who I am; the Laird of Baillie Clan.”

“But how did ye get this Lairdship?” she asked as her voice shook. Jonah didn’t respond for a moment, still struck that she was asking him such questions. “Did ye kill the previous Laird and Lady of Baillie clan?” she asked in a much louder voice. He could hear the distress that this was causing her, but Jonah wasn’t the sentimental type; he didn’t care for her tears.

“Aye, I killed them,” he snapped.



It was the confirmation that Isla wasn’t sure how to take. Part of her was relieved to finally know what had happened to her parents, but the other part of her was so angry with Jonah that she was struggling to contain herself. She started to wriggle out of his grip, her tears flowed in great rivers down her cheeks, but she no longer cared.

She used her elbow and pushed it back into his gut with some force, earning a grunt from him as she felt his grip on her loosen. Isla

quickly ducked under his arms and started away from him, but she hadn't been quite quick enough. She felt his sword - like a kiss - catch against her arm. It wasn't hard enough to stab her, but enough to create a cut in the skin. Her arm was suddenly incredibly warm and she winced in pain.

Arran ran forward in an instant, using his sword to deflect Jonah's next blow. Isla quickly moved behind him, holding onto her injured arm as Keira stepped forward and pulled her out of the way.

Isla's mind was still reeling with what to do. This was the man who had killed her parents and changed the course of her life forever. She was having a rather difficult time coming to terms with the fact that he was so powerful and was still trying to become even more powerful. It was as though killing her parents hadn't been enough for him, he had to take on another clan, and she was sure that he wouldn't just stop at two.

Arran was raining down heavy blows with his sword, and it was evident that he was much more skilled at fighting than Jonah was. He grunted and struck continuously until Isla could see sweat beading on his forehead.

Isla stayed back, aware that there were more guards at the door waiting to fight them should Jonah command it. However, Jonah was far too busy being on the defensive side of the fight and simply trying to hold his ground. He would wince at every block that he was able to deliver, the sound of metal clanging against metal was starting to hurt Isla's ears.

She watched as Arran finally started to close in. He used his body to dodge around Jonah's clumsy attempts at defending himself. Finally, Jonah had left himself exposed. The egocentric man hadn't worn armor to his wedding, and so there was nothing to protect him as the sword sliced through him.

Isla quickly turned away, not wanting to see the violence of it. Her heart was pounding in her ears, but she could still hear the shallow breaths that Jonah was making in his last few fatal attempts to stay alive.

A thumping noise rang through the chapel as he slumped to the floor, but he was silent, and it was finally over.

Isla waited a moment, scared to move in case the guards would continue with their attack. Yet as she slowly turned around, she noticed that the guards were now simply standing there and waiting for new instruction. Nobody appeared sad that their leader was gone, and it was at that moment that Isla realized he had never had any of their loyalty.

Jonah had been ruling with fear, but he had completely ignored the fact that fear didn't create trustworthy followers. The men standing before them were proof of that.

As soon as she realized that it was safe, she ran straight into Arran's arms, holding onto him tightly. She didn't care for her own injury. It was simply a bad cut that would heal.

Isla didn't even mind the idea of having a scar there; it would be something to remind her of the day that they were able to defeat the man who had murdered her parents.

He quickly pressed his lips to hers, holding onto her with his left hand as his sword was still in his right. Isla blushed against him, blushing at the thought of his family seeing such a sight. But in that moment, she didn't care if his mother was going to find her too forward. All she cared about was that Arran was safe, and he was with her again.

"I love ye," she whispered to him.

"Aye, I love ye more," Arran smiled down at her, triumphant in his win. "And I promise that once this is all cleared up, I will make ye my Lady in this chapel."

Epilogue

Isla found life at the castle a rather dramatic change. For the first week, she felt as though she had been taken to a foreign land, where everything was different. Even the way that she was expected to eat and talk was different.

There were servants that she wanted to speak to because they appeared friendlier than the noblemen and women, but it was frowned upon to do so. Isla was trying her hardest with adjusting to castle life, but there were so many challenges that she hadn't been expecting in her way.

However, on that first day, she sat in the physician's room, and she found herself having to bite her tongue to stop herself from trying to correct the old man.

"Ye have knowledge of these treatments?" he asked when she finally could keep it in no longer.

"Aye, and so does my aunt, she is a very good healer," Isla said with a small smile.

She knew the exact poultice that could be used for her arm to make sure that it left no scar, but she didn't want to tell the man how to do his job. She simply sat patiently as Arran paced about the room.

"I'm fine, honestly," Isla said, trying to settle him down.

"Aye, but all it would have taken was for ye to have nae moved quick enough, and Jonah would have hurt ye more," Arran said, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry that I could nae protect ye then."

"But ye did protect me in the end," Isla said, reaching out to caress his

arm with her hand.

“It could have been too late,” Arran said before leaving the room.

For a while, Isla had thought that his anger extended to her. But she later learned why he had left the room in such a hurry.

Three days later, her aunt arrived with an escort of guards. Isla’s arm was healing, but this was the perfect surprise that she hadn’t anticipated at all.

“Ye did this for me?” Isla blinked in surprise as she ran to embrace her aunt.

“Aye, I told ye that Colton had gone out hunting for a few days...”

“And this is what I caught,” Colton said with a chuckle as he dismounted his horse and stepped past the reuniting family.

“I cannae believe that ye are here,” Isla said, breathing heavily.

“I came to make sure that ye were all right. Colton told me about yer arm,” Elsie said with a smile.

Seeing her out of the forest felt so strange to Isla. She had only ever seen her aunt in the thick of the trees, or in the cottage, she hadn’t seen her dismount a horse before.

“I’m fine, my arm is just a scratch,” Isla brushed it off.

“Ye ken that I never take ‘just a scratch’ easily when ye say it like that,” Elsie said as she started to fret as usual. “It could get infected and then we would have to find...”

Isla had stopped listening. She turned slightly to see that Arran’s mother was regarding them with a strange look. Isla knew that she wasn’t the most conventional or obvious choice for Arran, and that her aunt was even stranger, but there was also the ghost of a smile on Rowan’s lips.

“Aunt Elsie, I’ve heard so much about ye from Isla,” the widowed Lady said as she stepped forward and bowed her head to Isla’s aunt.

“My Lady,” Elsie said, attempting a curtsy.

“Please, it’s a pleasure to have ye as our guest,” Rowan smiled.

Isla made the connection shortly after that Elsie was going to be in the castle for the wedding. It wasn’t for another few weeks, but Elsie had promised to stay for a while, and that meant she could be there for her.

“I’m sorry that ye had to find out this way about yer parents,” Elsie said one day as they walked through the castle together.

“I ken, but they have been avenged now,” Isla said while thinking about all of the trouble that Jonah had caused in her life. “We should focus on the future, but still remember them.”

“Aye, that’s a good way to look at it,” Elsie said and then pursed her lips for a moment. “Ye ken that it means ye will be the Lady of Baillie Clan?”

“But I am to be the Lady of this clan?” Isla said with a frown. “How could I be in two places at once?”

“Well, ye would elect a council to help ye run things in both places, and Arran would help ye. But ye are the rightful leader of the clan, and yer parents would want ye to take that place.”

“I dinnae ken if I can,” Isla said as she stared out of one of the large castle windows.

“Well, I believe in ye if that counts for anything,” Elsie said with a chuckle. “Ye will do well here, I can feel it.”

Isla thought about all that they had gone through to get to that moment; they had a wedding to organize, and shortly after that there would be the ceremony of making her the Lady of Baillie Clan. Her mind was spinning with so much to think about, but Isla was simply glad to have her aunt by her side.



That night, Isla was unable to sleep for some time, she lay tossing and

turning in her bed as she tried but failed to capture any amount of sleep. Something wasn't right. She could feel it in her body, but she didn't know what it meant.

Her stomach ached and she felt slightly sick at one point, but it wasn't until the morning when the sickness came.

"Are ye all right, my love?" Arran asked from their bed as Isla crouched to be sick into a bucket once again.

"Aye, can ye get my aunt?" Isla managed, her voice hoarse. Tears stung her eyes from the vomiting, but she tried her best to appear as though everything was fine.

Arran quickly left the room and Isla slowly crawled back onto the edge of the bed, taking the bucket with her. She groaned and heaved as another wave of sickness came and went.

"What do ye think it could be?" Arran asked as Elsie rushed into the room first. She was staring at her niece as Isla groaned and tried to sit up.

"It's difficult to say," Elsie said as she helped Isla to sit up. She placed a hand to her stomach gently, pressing it with her usual tender touch.

"Perhaps something from last night's dinner?"

Isla could hear the panic in Arran's voice. He was terrified of something happening to the woman that he loved, and in that moment, she felt her heart warm at how much he cared for her.

"I dinnae think that it would take so long to react," Elsie said. Her brow was knitted into a tight frown and her lips were pursed.

"What could it be then?"

She straightened up as her hand continued to press against her stomach, the corners of her lips were starting to perk up. Isla was still as confused as Arran as to what it would mean.

"Ye are pregnant," Elsie revealed with a small smile on her face.

“Pregnant,” Isla tried out the word, her eyes wide as she thought about what this would mean for her. “Are ye sure?”

“Isla, I can sense these things, and I am positive that ye are,” Elsie said as the smile on her face grew.

“That is fantastic news!” Arran said as he quickly moved to embrace his wife. Isla still felt rather sick, but she was elated and scared all at the same time. “Ye will give me a beautiful healthy heir, and together we will live out our lives.”

Isla felt her heart flutter at the thought of it. She smiled widely and placed her own hand to her stomach, delighted by the thought of having a baby.

“I will leave ye two alone,” Elsie said with a chuckle as she quickly left the room.

“My family is going to be so happy with this news too,” Arran said. Isla blushed at the thought of telling them. “We should still wait until after the wedding to tell people though.”

“Of course,” Isla nodded. “I ken that my aunt will nae tell anyone.”

“Good,” Arran nodded. “I love ye so much.”

“I love ye more, and I cannae wait to bring this baby into the world,” Isla smiled as she leaned against his large chest.

“Aye, we will expand our family and I promise to love ye both until my last breath,” Arran smiled at her as he spoke. In that moment, Isla felt nothing but complete.

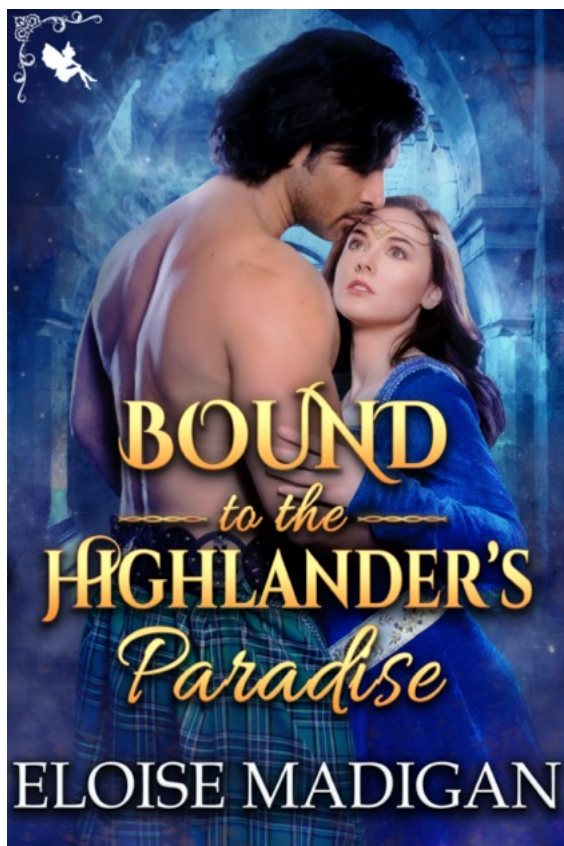
The End?

Extended Epilogue

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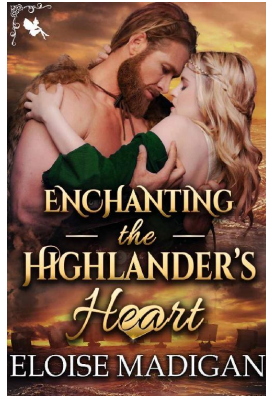


Stop! Before you go, turn on to the next page for a steamy, passionate

surprise with your name on it...

Devour my neWest best-seller...

Read the first chapters of *Enchanting the Highlander's Heart* one of my best stories so far!



Preview: Enchanting the Highlander's Heart

“Ye look bonnie, honey,” Elise Higgins, Madeleine’s mother,

spoke softly as she stroked her daughter’s hair gently and smiled at her. Madeleine forced on a responsive smile as she met her mother’s green eyes in the mirror, and swallowed. “Ye will make the bonniest bride in the entire Highlands, and yer weddin’ feast will be celebrated by many Laids and powerful men.”

Madeleine forced another smile. All her parents cared about was how large the feast would be, and the expensive jewelries they already received from Laird MacNab, but she cared about not spending the rest of her life with a man like Eric Wallace.

“Come on, let’s get to the Grand Hall,” Elise said again, and tugged Madeleine to her feet. They headed out of her chamber, to the hall, and when she stepped in, the music stopped for a moment and all eyes landed on her.

Madeleine felt the expectant gaze of everyone in the hall on her as she walked toward her father, and he stretched out his hand to welcome her. Laird MacNab was by his side, his smile wide, and his hawkish blue gaze pinned on Madeleine as she got to the table.

“My daughter,” Rhys Higgins said in a proud tone and Madeleine smiled again. “Take a seat by my side,” he offered and she sat by his left while her mother took the seat to his right. She remembered her mother’s words from a fortnight ago when her father had first announced his decision to betroth her to Laird MacNab.

“Yer faither is a very powerful Laird, Maddie, and that makes ye a powerful lady. Ye have to fulfill yer duties to this clan and marry Eric Wallace, he is the best man for ye,” Elise had said to encourage her, but Madeleine knew her mother too well, and she knew her concern was the vast access to wealth she stood to gain from an alliance with a man like Wallace.

My parents repulse me sometimes, she thought as she picked a quaich and drank from it. The music in the hall continued, and from where she sat, she felt Eric's gaze on her. It burned her skin, and filled her with an urge to flee the hall.

Madeleine had spoken to Eric only once since the announcement of her betrothal, and she didn't like him. He had made it crystal clear what she was to him. A prize he won because of her father's greed, and he expected her to be of best behavior and begin preparations for their wedding at once. This entire feast was to announce their wedding date, but Madeleine had other plans.

She couldn't sit and let her father give her away to a man as vile as Eric, one who didn't even treat his servants' right. Her father stood up from his seat then and raised his quaich. The music stopped, and the entire hall fell silent as her father's gaze drifted across the faces in the room. "Today, we gather here to celebrate a union," he began, and Madeleine's breath hitched in her throat. She reddened, and her scared gaze drifted to her mother's.

Elise smiled again, encouragingly, and Madeleine's pulse heightened. When her father had first spoken of his plans, she had been too frightened to speak up then. "The union between my daughter, Madeleine, and Laird MacNab," he continued, and sweat trickled down her arms clad in the sleeves of the green full-flounced dress she wore.

Laird MacNab stood from his seat, and the crowd erupted into a loud applause. "I am honored to wed yer daughter," he said, and extended his quaich to make a toast.

Madeleine felt sick to her stomach, and her head swooned as she watched the feast continue.

Do it now, Madeleine...speak up.

Her father sat down again, and a servant filled his quaich. Madeleine sprang out of her seat, and yelled so everyone could hear her regardless of the loud music playing in the background. "I willnae."



Madeleine was fleeing after the declaration, already half way down the corridor when she heard her father's voice. "Maddie—"

She trembled, her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, and the bodice of her dress suddenly felt too tight. She spun around to see him

storm toward her, and before she could protest, his hands wrapped around her arm. He led her down the corridor, and into his study. Laird MacNab followed them, and he shut the door behind him.

Standing in the study with both men, their furious and murderous gaze fixed on her, she trembled where she stood, but pretended to hold her ground by lifting her chin a little when her father spoke. "Yer weddin' to Eric is the day after tomorrow."

Madeleine's eyes widened. "Ye will wed him immediately as I will have no delays, and neither will I have ye underminin' my authority in my castle. Laird MacNab will teach ye a lesson when ye go home with him," he added, and Madeleine's gaze drifted to Laird MacNab's.

There was a knowing smile on his face, and his eyes gleamed evilly, it made a chill run up her spine. "Faither, please," she began, but he raised his hand and silenced her with his reply.

"I willnae hear it, Madeleine, ye will obey and wed him," he said in a final tone, and turned away from her. Tears stung Madeleine's eyes, but she clamped her lips shut, turned and rushed out of his study.

She ran down the hall, and took the right turn leading into the garden. Once outside, she dropped to her knees in a corner, and allowed the tears to slip down her face.

I hate this...I cannae wed him, I wouldnae do it.

Madeleine heard footsteps, and she scrambled to her feet. Quickly, she wiped her face, and sucked in a deep breath as Eric drew closer to her. She gasped when he reached for her face the moment he got to her, and gently stroked her chin.

"Bonnie Maddie," he whispered in a soft voice. "Yer faither kens that I will take good care of ye," he said, and suddenly, pulled her to him. Madeleine felt his breath on her face, inching close to her lips, and it repulsed her. "Ye will be lady of my castle, and ye will do as I say, nay spontaneous acts like what ye did in the hall earlier, as I will also never let a woman undermine my authority before my men."

His gaze drifted over her face, and stopped on her lips. Madeleine held her breath for a minute. She wanted to scream, and fight her way out of his grip, but his hold tightened even before she moved, and she knew it was of no use to fight. "Do ye understand?"

Madeleine nodded, and he released her. She shifted away from him, and wrapped her arms around her body as dread filled her. If she ever married Eric, he would treat her terribly, she was sure of it, and she

couldn't let it happen.

"Goodnight, Maddie," he whispered, then turned and walked away. Madeleine stared at his retreating figure until he had disappeared into the castle, and she finally released the breath she held as she retreated to her bedchamber. The only thing that came to mind was fleeing, and it was her best option. The feast was still ongoing, her parents would be occupied, enjoying the attention they had, and the conversations over delicious pie and plenty wine. No one would be on alert tonight, and she would be long gone before anyone noticed.

As the thought crossed her mind, it lingered, and formed, and she jumped off her bed and sprang into action. Madeleine was out of her chamber in less than thirty minutes, and she carefully found her way to the garden exit of the castle. If she could make it out through the garden, then the rest would be easier.

As she neared the exit into the garden, she heard giggles, and hushed whispers, and she stopped in her tracks when she saw a tall, muscular man step out of the shadows.

The first streaks of morning light broke through the horizon as

Madeleine approached Doune. She had never spent this much time riding before, and she was cold, exhausted, and hungry as she rode on the horse she stole from a villager's yard back in McGuire after escaping the guard she saw.

She shuddered and continued riding, her source of hope was the outer walls of Doune Castle she could see from where she was. The last time Madeleine saw her cousin, Matthew Higgins, was the day of his wedding feast.

Her father was never kind to his brother George, and Madeleine never understood why. She had grown fond of her cousin because they had spent long summers together in her castle in McGuire, but she had only been to Doune once, five years ago when he married his wife from another clan.

When she reached the gate of the castle, the guards in front stopped her, and she took off the cloak covering her head. At least she didn't need to disguise herself here, yet.

"Who are ye?"

"I'm here to see Laird Doune," she replied, and the guard eyed her. "I'm his cousin from McGuire," she added. "Madeleine Higgins."

The man cocked a brow, but he said nothing as he allowed her to pass through the gate, then ordered another guard to go inform the Laird in the keep. Madeleine dismounted her horse when she reached the entrance of the keep, but she made no move to walk into the castle until she saw her cousin walk out.

He beamed and spread out his arms to hug her the moment he stepped out, and Madeleine accepted his warm embrace. "Matthew," she whispered when he released her, and she smiled at him.

"It is so good to see ye, Maddie," Matthew said. "Where are ye parents? Ye maither?"

"I am alone," she replied, and her gaze became wary when she saw the question pop in his eyes.

"Ye rode out here all by yerself?" he asked, a concerned look in his blue eyes, and Madeleine nodded. "Come inside," he said and led her into the castle.

They walked the long corridor together, then reached the entrance of the keep, when Madeleine saw Harriet, Matthew's wife, walk down the stairs.

Harriet's smile was wide when she saw Madeleine. "Maddie, dear," she said. "This is a surprising visit," she said as they hugged and Madeleine placed a kiss on both her cheeks.

"Did she ride alone?" Harriet asked, and Matthew replied before Madeleine could.

"Aye, she did...have a servant prepare her bath and clean clothes," Matthew said as he rubbed Madeleine's shoulder, then he gave her a warm smile.

"I have to tell ye, Matthew," Madeleine said when his wife walked away. "I ran away from McGuire."

Matthew's eyes widened, and Madeleine cleared her throat. "I came here because I didnae ken where else to go, but we both ken I cannae stay here as this is the first place my faither will look," she explained. "Ye have to help me get as far away from McGuire as possible, please, Matthew," she pleaded desperately.

"Maddie, what is goin' on? Why have ye fled home?" he asked, and she swallowed. She was exhausted from her ride, and the idea of a hot bath and meal was more alluring than ever, but Madeleine knew she had to tell Matthew what was going on now before more time passed. That way, he would know how to help her.

"They want me to wed," she replied as he took her hand and led her up the stairs to the first landing. "They want me to wed Laird MacNab, and I cannae imagine myself married to a man as vile as he is."

Matthew sighed, and shook his head. "I ken Eric Wallace," he said, and a frown spread over his forehead. "It is unthinkable that yer faither would want ye to spend the rest of yer life with a man like him."

“If they find me then I will have nay choice, so I had to run,” she said again, and Harriet came out of a chamber, and approached them.

“I will help ye, Maddie, but for now, ye have to rest,” Matthew said and gently rubbed her shoulder. “We will discuss what to do when ye wake up.”

“All right,” she agreed, and turned to Harriet.

“A chamber is ready for ye,” Harriet said, and Matthew wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist. Madeleine thanked them again, then entered the chamber where a servant had already prepared a hot bath and placed clean dresses on the bedding.

She slipped out of her cloak and dress, then stepped into the bath. As the hot water soaked her skin, and warmed her, she relaxed and closed her eyes, exhaling deeply.

Matthew will help me, she thought as she finished her bath, wrapped herself in a night dress then climbed into the bed. She had always imagined marrying a man she was deeply in love with, and having a small, lovely family, something similar to what her cousin now had with Harriet, and she couldn’t let her parents steal that dream from her.

Slowly, Madeleine drifted into a much-needed sleep and hours later when she opened her eyes, the sun was setting.

The next morning, Madeleine woke up to a soft knock on the door. When it opened, a servant walked in, and curtsied. “Lady Madeleine,” she said and raised her head. Madeleine’s gaze met with the girl’s dark ones, and color drained from her face as she said, “Laird Doune has asked me to tell ye that yer faither is here in Doune.”

Matthew and Harriet returned to Madeleine's chamber later in the day, and she was relieved when he announced her father left. "I was worried that he would find me here," she said, her hand on her chest as she sighed in relief.

"We still have to get ye out of here," Harriet replied and took her hand. "Yer faither is nay convinced that ye are not here, and he will be back."

Matthew nodded, and Madeleine averted her gaze to him. "Harriet has suggested that ye go live in her brother's castle, in Duart."

Madeleine nodded. "Duart is far off from here, isn't it?" she asked, and Matthew nodded.

"It will be a long journey, and she will ride with ye alongside my most trusted guards," Matthew replied.

"My brother isnae very welcomin' to strangers, but I am certain that he will help ye if I take ye to him."

Madeleine's spirit lifted, and she smiled. "I am indeed grateful to both of ye," she said. "This means so much to me."

"Yer faither is wrong trying to wed ye off to Laird MacNab, and I willnae sit back and watch ye suffer."

"Rest today, Maddie," Harriet said and squeezed her hands. "We ride for Duart at dawn."

After Harriet and Matthew left, Madeleine dropped on the bed, and sighed. She spent the rest of the night worrying about what lay ahead in her future. A young lady who deserted her home didn't have much to look ahead to, but this was the fate she was dealt, and she had to handle it.

She also wondered what Harriet's brother would look like. She had

seen him once, during Matthew's wedding feast five years ago, but she had barely gotten a good look at him. Also, she had heard stories of the Laird, and his preference for seclusion, so she doubted he would want to help her.

She decided to hope for the best, as this was her only chance, and with Harriet's persuasion, it might work. She was after all his sister.

Madeleine set out the next morning with Harriet, and they rode for Duart. It was her first time this far away from home, and she was hopeful. Her father or Laird MacNab would never be able to find her there.

They arrived at Duart in the late hours of the next evening, and Madeleine was completely exhausted from the journey when they finally rode into the castle. She dismounted after Harriet, and they walked into the castle.

Harriet rushed into the corridor leading to the main keep, and Madeleine saw the man walking down the stairs. He had a head full of brown locks of hair, then he looked up. Madeleine's gaze met with his pale blue eyes, and her breath hitched her throat.

He narrowed his gaze a little when he saw her and a sudden tingle raced up her spine as she felt the intensity of his gaze. He quickly shifted it to his sister, and a smile crossed his lips as he spread his arms out to hug her.

He was tall, and her gaze drifted over his muscular build. She instantly admired his looks, and it made her flush as color rose to her cheeks. His round eyes fixed on hers for a second before he shifted it to Harriet.

His smile was wide, and the tingle reached her stomach, forming knots, and she flushed. He had the most amazing eyes she had ever seen, and the way he had looked at her momentarily made her feel... she couldn't explain how it made her feel, but it was a tingle she had never felt before.

He descended the stairs and met his sister halfway, pulling her close to his large build.

"Harriet," he said in a deep baritone voice as he hugged her, and his gaze met with hers again. Harriet pulled away, and reached out to Madeleine.

"It is a pleasure to see ye too, brother. How have ye been?"

"All has been well," he replied, his gaze still on Madeleine, and she

knew he wanted to ask, so she stepped forward and spoke before Harriet.

“Madeleine Higgins,” she said, introducing herself with an extended hand that he accepted graciously. He stiffened, then his lips dropped to place a kiss on the back of her palm, and the contact of his lips made her stomach swirl. The knots tightened, and her lips suddenly went dry.

The corners of Odhran’s lips curved into a smile, although it didn’t reach his eyes, and Madeleine wondered what he thought of his sister bringing her here without notice.

“Maddie is my husband’s cousin,” Harriet said when he released her hand, and Madeleine covered the hand he kissed with her other one, her heart pounding in her chest. She wondered if anyone could hear it as loudly as she could. *This is mortifying*, she thought as she turned to Harriet.

“She needs help,” Harriet continued. “And I have brought her here for ye to help her,” she added. Madeleine saw the Laird’s jaw tighten, and his eyes narrowed down on his sister’s again. Harriet added immediately. “Before ye say anythin’ Oddie, just discuss this with me.”

“All right, we will discuss this in the morning. Yer visit is without notice, so I have to prepare a chamber for ye to rest the night alongside yer friend,” he replied and spared Madeleine a momentary glance before adding. “I hope ye dinnae mind yer old chamber?”

“My old chamber is perfect, Oddie,” Harriet replied with a smile, and touched his cheek. He smiled at her, then turned and walked away. Harriet turned to Madeleine.

“Ye think he will agree to hide me here?” Madeleine asked, and Harriet nodded and led her up the stairs.

“He is my brother, Maddie, he will do anythin’ for me.”



Madeleine was worried the entire night because she didn’t know her fate. If Laird Duart turned them away, then what would she do? There was no one else to turn to and returning home meant bending to her father’s will.

Harriet told her she would be safe here because her brother rarely entertained guests, but would he want to her to stay?

Harriet left the chamber early, and returned later to give her good news. "Oddie has agreed to let ye stay here, so long as ye remain in the castle as yer faither will have his men combing the Highlands for ye, and he wants to avoid getting' into any trouble with any Laird."

Madeleine sighed in relief. "Oh, thank ye so much, Harriet," she said and grabbed her friend's hand. "Ye have saved me from my faither, I am forever indebted to ye," she said, and Harriet hugged her.

Relieved, Madeleine shared dinner with Harriet, and the next day Harriet set out to return home. She spent the rest of the day in the chamber watching the fields from the window in the castle, and late in the evening she decided to find Laird Duart, and thank him for his graciousness.

When she walked down the stairs, the beauty of the castle walls immediately caught her attention, and she walked over to one, and admired the stone carvings embedded in it. Madeleine was lost in her exploration of the castle, she walked through the corridor, admiring every pillar, and carving, not conscious of which part of the castle she was in.

She stopped when she got to the grand hall, and she stepped inside because the door was ajar. The huge empty room reminded her of the feast back in her castle few days back when her father had almost married her away.

Thankful that she had escaped that fate, Madeleine smiled and swirled around, giggling to herself. She stepped on the hem of the dress she wore, and tripped, but instead of colliding with the hard ground, she felt hard muscles break her fall, and strong steady arms grab around her waist.

Madeleine gasped, and her eyes widened and landed on Laird Duart's blue ones, and their gazes met and lingered. Color rose to her cheeks alongside the heat inside her as she looked into his eyes, and his gaze dropped to her lips, then slowly back to her eyes again.

"I...I was searchin' for ye," she stammered, and swallowed. He pressed his lips into a thin line, then slowly released her, steadying her to stand on her own two feet. "I wanted to thank ye, for lettin' me stay here, it really means a lot to me," Madeleine rushed to say, scared that she would lose her voice if she kept looking into his intense eyes. She looked away first, and cleared her throat, hoping that he would say something and not just look at her like she was strange.

"Ye should be more careful," he said in an icy tone. "I wouldnae want ye to break yer neck from a fall while ye are here."

He was so close, she could barely hear a word of what he said because his scent tantalized her senses. The woody scent with a mixture of mint in his breath made her flush and her cheeks burned from the intensity of his eyes searching hers.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered as he released her. Madeleine immediately missed the warmth of his closeness, and the direction of her thoughts appalled her.

He turned and walked away without another word, leaving her stunned, and unable to regain her composure until seconds flew back.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

[My Book](#)

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About the Author

Eloise Madigan is a passionate writer who fell in love with Scotland when she was only 5 years old. On a trip to the beautiful Highlands with her family, she was encouraged by the mesmerizing scenery to start weaving intricate stories about handsome Highlanders and beautiful lasses.

Born in the US to a Scottish mother and an American father, she formed a deep bond with her mother's roots. She studied English Literature and Creative Writing, and soon she began working as an editor for a small publishing house. But even though she liked editing, her true love lay in the short romantic stories she could write... This is when she decided to start publishing her own romance novels!

When Eloise isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with family and friends.

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